

ABAM  
PRESENTS

# NLI-10

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By

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# PROLOGUE

The Plaza Hotel was surrounded by a hum of activity as celebrities and politicians sauntered along the red carpet. At either side, barriers held back lesser men, women and children, who were occasionally greeted by those they adored on their way into the gala. A light rain whisked by a gentle breeze was falling on to the night streets, slowly soaking into the excitable crowd's summer clothes, but not bothering the affluent, who were chased down their private crimson path by assistants holding oversized golf umbrellas above them, as if a single drop of water might ruin their quaffed hair and bespoke clothing.

The woman watched from high up in the building across the street, hiding back from the light gleaming through the windows, curtains masking her presence. For this mission the Network had adopted the names of revolutionary leaders, for what they were intending was in some ways a revolution. The use of code names was decided after they had scrubbed their true identities from the NeuralNet. They'd never say their names – real or otherwise – out loud, but on the slight chance the Network might be breached or bridged, they needed to ensure that what might be left of their real identities could not be tracked back from an incursion. The draw was random, but felt rigged when the slight brunette at the window was given the moniker *Marx*, the father of The Communist Manifesto, a prophet of revolt. She didn't like that she was seen as the forbearer of the revolution, and as she started to dwell on it, turned off the anxiety that was bubbling in the back of her mind.

She needed to be in the moment, without distraction from emotion, and be certain her target was on schedule. Marx had acquired the list of staggered arrival times in advance, but didn't trust that the Secretary Of State wouldn't find an excuse not to show. It was a charity event after all, and he had more important things to do, with more important people. She kept a careful eye from the window as car after car pulled up, rain

spattering off their roofs like hundreds of tiny depth charges, waiting patiently for a government vehicle to arrive.

She sipped at a cardboard cup of coffee that had long since gone cold. Marx didn't drink coffee for the caffeine, she just needed something to keep her hands busy whilst she waited. Her adenosine receptors were set to manual, blood vessels dilated, oxygenation levels high, already prepared for the task she had ahead of her. Two minutes until he was due. She had to get ready.

Delving into operational controls, she tugged on the neural circuits that got her pituitary turning over, secreting hormones that would soon have adrenaline pumping. They had never tried anything this public before, and it could easily go wrong before she even stepped into the hotel. But she had to prove to herself and the Network that they could get access to high profile targets, get the information that would take them further and deeper into the bowels of the labyrinth, and hopefully come out the other side victorious.

Two minutes came and went. No sign of the car. She knocked back the last of the coffee and threw it into a recycling box by a desk, glancing around at the office she had broken in to. Marx had never worked in a place like this, a white-walled box, generic landscape prints screwed into frames that were in turn screwed in to the thin plasterboard separating one worker from another. She wondered if she'd ever live a normal life again, or if this was how it would be for the rest of her presumably truncated life. Whispers over the top of her thought stream brought her back to the matter at hand, a download of information from the Network. There had been traffic on the Long Island Expressway. He was running late, but in moments he'd arrive. She needed to see him for herself, needed to be certain he was there before she walked into the lion's den.

Another minute passed, and finally his car pulled up to the bottom of the red carpet. She saw wisps of grey hair emerge just before a golf umbrella came in to rescue him from the drizzle, obscuring her view in the process. Marx waited until he walked down the red carpet and the umbrella was taken away for the next guest, waited for him to turn and face the crowd, to smile and wave at an indifferent public. FaceRecog confirmed it was him. It was time to act.

She was out the office and down the stairs before the elevator would have made it up to her perch on the twentieth floor. Her long dark hair

flowed through the air like a squirrel's tail as her skeletal frame leapt four steps at a time, jumping over banisters to skip corners. Bursting out on to the street she instantly activated a calm, steady pace, instructing her body to imitate a gait that wouldn't be read as suspicious by the myriad intelligent A-Eye cameras at every corner, watching every person, every face, every movement. The NeuralNet was trained to spy anything that seemed out of the ordinary, that could be determined as hostile in any way.

She knew this, because she knew them, and until The Network had scrubbed their Recog profiles, it knew her too. Now she was just a blank face, an unimportant background character in a world of more important people. Marx went down the alley at the side of the hotel towards the kitchen, a row of dumpsters piled high with discarded cuisine, offcuts of meat and vegetable peels rotting in rusting street-ovens in the summer heat. She switched off her sense of smell whilst walking past them, it would only be for mere seconds, but she figured she might as well make use of her advanced control functions. The door to the kitchen was locked, APEXsecurity controlling the access points for the whole hotel. Reaching for the door handle, whispers through the Network had it unlocked and camera feeds looping to mask her entry into the building.

She walked along the corridor, tying up her hair as her newly-adopted confident strut told the few waitstaff she passed that *she belonged*. Following a waitress into the bathroom, Marx lay a hand on the blonde waif's neck as she entered a stall. In an instant, orders had been dictated to her brain, the waitress was removing her clothes and handing them over. She then sat on the toilet, locked herself in, and closed her eyes as her pineal gland started secreting melatonin accompanied by a DMT chaser, sending her into a deep sleep with vivid psychedelic dreams that would keep her unconscious for the next few hours. Dressing in the woman's uniform, Marx pushed her clothes under the stall so her sleeping victim wouldn't be left in her underwear. Chances are, Marx wasn't going to have the luxury of time on her exit, and she felt bad at the idea of causing a stranger embarrassment. She lingered on the thought for longer than necessary. It was nice to care about another human being, proved she was still human and could be concerned with those outside the Network, even if it was just a small gesture.

Emerging from the toilets, Marx blended in with the staff milling around the kitchen, taking hors d'oeuvres and champagne out to the esteemed guests. She grabbed a tray of glasses and followed the centipede of servers out into the fray, scanning for her intended target. FaceRecog made it easier, she took her focus off individuals and watched everyone, every movement, every mannerism and expression. Time felt like it slowed to a standstill as she ducked and dove with grace through the sea of bodies, waiting for the background Recog process to chime in her head with an alert. Passing celebrities and personalities, actors and sports stars, she saw a gaggle of politicians verbally felating one-another with platitudes. Amongst them was a grey wisp of hair being lauded by people who didn't matter to Marx. She made her way round to catch a glimpse of his profile, flicking her vision back to singular-focus, and deep in the back of her mind the alert sounded. There he was, just feet away. She approached The Secretary Of State and offered him the tray.

“Champagne?” Marx asked, waiting to catch his eye. She wanted to watch his reaction when the connection was made.

“I'm good darlin'.” he said, ignoring her. Marx didn't like to be ignored. She grabbed his wrist, her tray falling to the ground as his attention turned completely to her. The connection was made, and she began to dig through his conscious and subconscious for what they needed, feeding the collected intel back to the Network. He watched as psychedelic distortions bled into his eyeline, colour washes and patterns peeled across his field of view. The woman ahead of him was the only clear face in an ocean of waving hues and light. She dug deeper and deeper, needed to find his connection to The Company, his knowledge of The Experiment and The Facilities. She could see in her mind's eye the rush of information flowing into the ether, astrally projecting across vast distances to reach the other Network nodes. He just stared at her, as her face melted in to twenty other faces, each of them sharing her intrusion into his consciousness, delving *beyond* his consciousness.

She had what she needed, and let go of his wrist. The champagne flutes exploded in a shower of glass and bubbles on the marble floor, followed by the clang of the metal tray bouncing off between the legs of the affluent and erudite. The Secretary Of State continued to stare at the



woman. She smiled to herself and stepped back into the crowd, her job done.

Shifting her sight from singular focus to hypersight, the whole room became pin-sharp, and she whipped through the *mélange* of people out to a fire exit. By the time she was out on the street, the Secretary was on the floor, his speech slurred, face half-drooping, body unresponsive. She hadn't intended on causing a stroke, but it was too late now. The alarm had been raised.

The streets of New York burst to life with sirens as Marx dashed across blocks, twisting and turning round corners and through alleys whenever possible. It was too late to hide from the A-Eyes, she just had to hope that the Network could jam the Recog from her exit, keep her face off the system, and aid in her escape from afar. If she could get across the bridge she'd be safe. Brooklyn was all but theirs, but it was a long way by foot and the cops had A-Eyes everywhere. Hypersight gave her the edge, she ran through the crowds, weaving in and out of people at full speed.

As a police car rolled up ahead of her, she was over the bonnet and pasted a palm on the exiting officer, in an instant telling his body to pass out. His partner was more worried about his fallen colleague than chasing a ghost that had disappeared amidst a street full of faces. Sliding down the bannister to the 57<sup>th</sup> Street subway, Marx went through the turnstile just as the F to Coney Island was approaching. She didn't care where the train was headed, as long as it took her out of the vicinity.

There was no sign of pursuit as the train left the station, but that didn't mean she was safe. Marx got out at 42<sup>nd</sup> Bryant Park, once again hiding in plain sight, scrolling through gaits of innocent walks until she found one that was different enough to those she had used previously. They might not have Recog data, but the FBI would already be involved, scanning gait patterns based on her entry and exit at the hotel.

She had tangled with them the last time the Network intercepted a Senator's intel. Pissing off Agent Callum Murphy, a brooding giant of a man, who was borderline obsessed with tracking her down. She thought of him fondly, or more specifically thought fondly of outsmarting him when he tried to apprehend her last. Walking down through Times Square, she smiled at how ridiculous he looked when she laid a hand on him back then, sending a short-run subroutine into his consciousness that replayed an oft-

recurring dream he had in which he was a ballerina in the Bolshoi Company. He was half-way through the first act of Swan Lake when the subroutine deactivated and he returned to a waking state, having spent the previous thirty minutes dancing for the Dallas PD.

Marx slunk through the crowd toward the A-train, but her bemused memory was short-lived, as she felt cold metal wrap around her wrists, the *cla-clink* of cuffs locking in on themselves, her other hand wrenched behind her back. She turned to see the large, beaming face of Agent Murphy staring down at her.

“Miss me?” he said, his grin revealing preternaturally large teeth more suited to a dog than a man.

She smiled. “Kinda miss the ballet more.” Marx said, unphased by her captor.

“You're not getting away so easy this time.” he said, cuffing her other hand.

“You'll let me go before you know it...” she said, taking a tight hold of his fingers

In an instant, the connection was made, his mind tapped into the Network. Time around him stopped dead in its tracks, a haze of colour and light, patterns and shapes crawling across his sight. As he stood there, he knew everything about the woman, the Network, their entire lives played out in 3D VR surround sound cinemascope smellovision in front of his eyes.



# 1

“I'm Ron, and I'm an addict.”

Ron was an addict. As were Sasha, Leo, Gary, Mike, Charlotte, Kiel, Dionne and Bobby. Sarah, however, felt like a fraud. It was her seventeenth week of Narcotics Anonymous, and her thirty fourth experience of the same feeling. The others had real addictions, coke, crack, meth, speed, heroin, and had truly suffered because of their abuse. Sarah had got '*a little carried away with psychedelic substances*', as she liked to put it, and didn't think her stories lived up to the dark and disturbing tales the others weaved twice a week at the back room of a cafe in Fitzrovia. Ron lost his house, Sasha had a couple of kids from the men she fucked for crystal, Leo gave blowjobs for blow, Gary made his girlfriend give the blowjobs for their crack, whilst Mike robbed from pensioners so he could score heroin for him and his son. The stories went on and on, and even though they were all clean now, Sarah didn't belong. Her story was one of white privilege, '*first world problems*' the people she hated on Facebook would have called them.

Her parents had died ten years ago in a car crash, and not knowing how to deal with the wealth of emotion, she turned to anything from LSD and mushrooms to peyote and mescaline, all with a marijuana chaser. Ten years of hallucinogenic delight, going from party to party, squat to squat, investing her insurance payout and inheritance on a hedonistic lifestyle that at twenty-seven had left her intellectually and emotionally exhausted. She was burnt out, her imagination having run riot from the time she left high school to the present day, minus seventeen weeks.

After a psychedelic revelation and some deep soul searching, she knew she had to sober up. Sarah wasn't convinced that NA really catered for her brand of over-indulgence, and her brain still longed for the psychedelics, nagged at her with visual tingles every now and then. Colours would dart through vibrancies, lines that should be solid would shimmer, and shadows would dance in her periphery. She had read up on the lingering effects of the substances she had saturated in, and discovered that

she probably had some kind of Persisting Perception Disorder that would likely stick around for the rest of her life. She missed the drugs, but not enough to go back. She had more important things ahead of her. Her sponsor, Bobby, always tried to make her feel better about her choice of narcotic.

“Substances are substances” he would say “Doesn't matter whether it's a real man's drug like coke, or some hippy shit like mushrooms, addictions are all the same.” he had repeated it to her a lot, and as sponsors go, was not the best. But they entertained each other, and he was there for her whenever she felt like giving in. He'd also rib her for her choice of drug whenever he got the chance.

“Seriously, if ye' gonna get an addiction, go with coke or heroin. Being a hallucinogenics burnout means ye' got to stop bathing and go into the wild to forage for nuts and berries, it's a fuck-ton of work.”

He made the NA process easier. At least she had a sponsor with a sense of humour, even if that humour was mostly directed at her. She shuddered to think of having Mike or Gary as someone to rely on, men who had – by excuse of addiction – been responsible for the deaths of their loved ones.

The session felt like it lasted forever, as it always did. Sarah's perception of time had been distorted since the drugs left her system. Seconds felt like minutes, minutes like hours, and the two hours of terrible stories from the group felt like a lifetime of living other people's hells. Try as she might, she couldn't block out the words. They would crawl under her skin and feed images to her exhausted brain that she wished she could exorcise. They stuck with her through the nights until the next session rolled along, at which point they had finally dissipated, only to be replaced with a whole new batch of disturbing imagery.

When the group finally ended, it felt like weeks had passed. Her cache of nightmares refilled, next came the awkward chit-chat. Sarah had learned that she couldn't just walk out of NA, that was taken as a worrying sign that she was out to score or relapse. She filled a cup of instant coffee from the urn on the refreshments table and knocked in a couple of sugars and milk for good measure. She normally had her coffee black, but this could hardly be considered '*coffee*' as such. It was black like coffee should be, but she considered it the beverage equivalent of a movie that was '*inspired by true events*'. The basic story might be there, but someone had tinkered with the

characters and plot to the point that the core elements were a distant memory. What remained, after she emerged from her analogy with a smile, was essentially contaminated hot water, void of taste or aroma. Mike joined her at the urn.

“You good?” he asked, his pale skin and chapped lips looking like Halloween ghost make-up under the strip lighting.

“Fine, I guess.” said Sarah, trying not to make eye contact. Mike had been there for the last ten weeks, clean for six of those, and over those last twelve sessions she had noticed his eyes roaming towards the female members of the crowd. Sarah felt a little nauseas to think about it, but was almost fascinated in observing his libido slowly return from being lost in an opiate mist. She imagined it tugging at strings in his brain and balls, lust clawing its way out of a coffin, desire telling him he needed to stick his dick in something.

“Cut your hair? Looks nice.” he said.

She hadn't, and knew it didn't. Personal grooming was low on her list of priorities.

“Thanks.” she said, her tone neutral.

Bobby came to her rescue. “Can I just grab the sugar?” he said, reaching between Sarah and Mike. She mouthed a *thank you* to him as he blocked the former junkie's advances any further. The two stepped away from the others and sipped at their over-sweetened '*coffaux*', as they had taken to calling it.

“You didn't say nothing in the sesh.” said Bobby “You doin' ok?”

She was, and told him as much. He didn't believe her, the rhetoric telling him that you can never trust an addict. “How's the job going?” he asked.

“You can't call it a job.” she replied, scoffing at the word.

“It's a nine to five, ain't it?” he said.

“It's volunteering. Jobs pay.” she said. “It's fine. The homeless shelter leaves me depressed, the asylum seeker support leaves me exhausted *and* depressed.”

“But ye' connecting again, right? Getting back in touch with other human beings, getting off the selfish train ye' been on the last few years.” He was right, and she nodded in agreement with a polite smile.

“Maybe y'need more time off between the two.” Bobby said. “One day between homeless and asylums may not be enough time to wash off the tragedy and injustice or whatever. Y'need some time for yourself too,

remember. As much as routine is helpful, an' all, maybe ye' just getting yourself stuck in a rut."

"That'd just mean more time by myself... and that's never a good thing, I'm not great company right now."

"Why don't y'try looking for a real job? Part time, couple of days a week, get y'self back into the real world."

"I still feel like a burnout." she said. "I'm not really sure I have the limited cognitive function required for waiting or secretarial work, which in and of itself is tragic. And even then, I don't think I could be one of those people who lives the nine to five routine and thinks a pint on a Friday night is exciting... I've lived and died a thousand times over, gone to other planes of reality, astrally projected back to the birth of the universe... And now I'm meant to find a job that stimulates me?"

"I quite like a pint at the end of the week..." said Bobby, laughing at, and then with her. "What have y'got to lose?" he asked, not waiting for an answer. "Maybe it's time y'pushed yourself. One or two days of work, real work, might be what y'need. It might get your Persistently Perceptive brain ticking over a little faster, giving it actual tasks to do. Instead of, albeit charitable, monotonous roles that don't push ya'."

She nodded in silent agreement, but didn't truly agree. Her agenda in NA was solely to get the tools to stay off the psychs long enough to move herself onwards and upwards, set herself on course with purpose and direction, and maybe one day set about a complete revolution in her life.

On the Crossrail home from Tottenham Court Road, she sunk into her chair and practised the self-reflection routine she had learned at NA. Looking at the actions in her life, her decisions, the cause and effect. A mental map of how she got from where she was the last time she was sober to the present moment. Her reflection didn't last long. The drumbeat emanating from the headphones of the man sitting next to her was *thumpa-thump-thumping* through her head as much as it was his, piercing her thoughts, distorting her map. She glared at him, but he was in a world of his music, unaware of those around him he was inflicting with the bass. She looked around for a free seat elsewhere, but there were none, and she didn't wish to stand for the rest of the journey.

Her eyes scanned the posters dotted around the carriage, something to keep her mind busy. They were advertising perfect bodies and cleaning

services, recruitment companies and hair replacement. Her gaze settled on a poster at the far end of the carriage, the lettering obscured, but the company's logo seemed familiar. She gave up her seat to get closer, to read it head-on. She had seen the branding and colour scheme before. It was called *A-Pharma*, a pharmaceutical company that she assumed was a subsidiary of a subsidiary of a subsidiary, eventually leading back to some demonic mega-corporation that no doubt assured its users they *definitely* weren't evil. She didn't know the name, but it was reminiscent of something she had seen before. Pulling out her phone, she realised the 'A' of the A-Pharma logo looked a lot like the 'A' of the APEX logo on the back of her handset. It was a sidetrack of thought that she appreciated, turning over her phone and realising she had killed four minutes of the journey with the mental meandering, and hadn't even read the poster yet.

*Looking for an easy and fun way to earn money  
in an exciting new field of research?*

***A-Pharma*** is recruiting clinical trial subjects now!  
*If you're aged between 18 and 45,  
you could be earning up to £20,000  
for **only** 3-6 months in one of our exclusive,  
fully-catered testing facilities.*

*Catch up on your reading!  
Learn a new Language!  
Binge Watch Netflix!  
And get paid for the pleasure!*

*Terms and conditions apply, routine health and fitness panel must be taken, A-Pharma has the right to refuse acceptance to trials, A-pharma is not responsible for any adverse side effects, full T&C on website.*

Sarah thought about the vast library of books she had inherited from her father. He had been obsessive about reading, and would consume anything with the written word. From SF and fantasy to true crime and biography, philosophy to psychology, classics to physics, every surface in her apartment was laden with his tomes, and she hadn't read so much as an introduction or prologue before getting distracted. Perhaps, she mused, this was her way out of her routine. A step closer to the revolution she wanted

so badly, and free money for three to six months she could spend reading, learning, clearing her head of the drugs whilst bettering her life. She was in the age bracket, didn't do any exercise, but figured she could pass a *routine* health and fitness check. She wondered if there were still drugs swimming in her system, and if they might be a problem. She even considered swilling an awful detox drink to get whatever markers or particles out of her bloodstream. She didn't know if it would work, or if it was even necessary, but the more she thought about it, the more she convinced herself that this would be a real chance for a new beginning.

Returning home, she jumped straight on her laptop, a custom build from a guy she found on the internet, made from generic parts, rather than a factory-made model. It cost more, but she didn't trust a corporate manufacturer not to be monitoring her every activity, after a scandal around the time her parents died. A wall of separation, no matter how thin, between her and the company felt reassuring. Even if she did have an APEX phone, but she told herself she got it because it was cheap, and never used it for anything personal, barely made any calls or sent texts, never used it to access emails or social accounts. She didn't really have anyone to talk to outside of NA anyway. She connected to the A-Pharma website, her Ghostly browser extension going crazy with the number of hidden cookies, analytics monitors and subroutines running in the background of the site. She blocked them all and started the application process. It was simple enough until she came to a question that stumped her.

*Do you, or have you ever used  
psychedelic substances recreationally?*

Yes ☐

No ☐

She could lie, obviously, but thinking about it, didn't trust that she could actually rinse or mask the tracers in her bloodstream with a generic detox concoction. Her neural chemistry or pathways were, as far as she was concerned, most likely irrevocably altered by substance abuse. She checked the 'yes' box, and a further question popped up.

*How would you describe your psychedelic drug use over the last five years;*

Heavy ☐

Moderate ☐

Light ☐

The question was curious, and didn't feel right, but she checked *heavy* use nonetheless, as her honesty from this point out would most likely be rescinded fairly swiftly. The rest of the questions returned to generic age, height, weight and education queries, and soon, the questionnaire was complete. After a quick check of her answers, she lingered on whether she should have lied about her use of psychoactives. Knowing they'd probably monitor the click activity on the application, she decided not to change her choices, and sent the application off.

An auto-response arrived thirty minutes later, asking when she would like to come in for her interview, consultation and initial run of physical tests. There was a calendar app embedded in the email, and she chose the following day. A further auto-response confirmed her selection, with the appointment time and address. Sarah's abuse of psychedelics had caused her to see connections and coincidences everywhere she looked, and this process felt all too fast and convenient to be a natural occurrence. Even seeing the poster started to seem too convenient, and a paranoid part of her brain was whispering that this was all a setup, all a trap of some kind.

*'The police don't seem to care about individual users of psychedelics, but what if they were using this as a net to capture me?'*

She knew it was ridiculous, but the whispers continued to haunt her. Sarah shut them up, reminding herself that tomorrow would bring her one step closer to the culmination of the crusade she had set herself on. One step closer to the life she wanted. She smiled to herself at the ridiculous stakes she was placing on an interview, but truly, it felt like this was a turning point.



The APEXMaps Journey Planner had Sarah take the Docklands Light Railway to Shadwell, then go on a long meandering walk to a business park where the A-Pharma facility was located. As she approached, it didn't look like it had been there long. The signage was fresh and new compared to the surrounding businesses, as if it had been unpacked and hung that day. Sarah didn't imagine medical facilities could pop up like cafes and vintage stores, but that didn't make it feel any less like it was put together recently. She walked in through the automatic double doors and went up to the desk. A thoroughly bored looking twenty-something in an ill fitting shirt was manning the reception, his hair and stubble preened to look like he just got out of bed, bags under his eyes adding a touch of honesty to the look. He booked Sarah in, telling her to sit in the waiting area until the nurse was ready to see her.

Ten minutes in, it drifted through Sarah's mind that perhaps this would be an experiment in itself, see how long they could leave her waiting until she gave up and walked away. She kept an eye on the clock behind the reception, reminding herself that it only *felt* like ten hours to her Persistently Perceptual brain, and that for normal people, this was nothing. The nurse finally arrived, and brought her into a room where she was given a hospital-like gown in lieu of her clothes. After checking Sarah's vitals, drained some blood, and then took her into a room down the corridor where Sarah was injected with gadolinium contrast and made to lie in an MRI. The nurse fired generic questions at her, a mix of basic mathematics and reasoning that Sarah could just about handle. She then played a selection of music, which the nurse assured her was to gauge her brain's reaction, but in what way and for why, Sarah couldn't imagine.

Thirty minutes later, after the mechanical bangs, clicks and groans of the machine had subsided, Sarah was taken to another room further down the hallway, where she was told to run on a treadmill until she could run no longer. She felt like a lab rat in a wheel, but when her legs felt like they

were going to give out, she pushed herself further, wanting to prove herself worthy of their experiment, worthy of the change she saw ahead. After an hour of running at constantly increasing speeds, her legs refused to propel her any longer, and she was helped into a wheelchair, pushed into yet another room, where she was helped onto a weight machine and instructed to lift and push weights until her arms felt like jelly. Her muscles ached, but at least after she had fought through that, the feeling had returned to her legs. Thoroughly exhausted from the testing regime, she was given back her clothes and returned to the waiting area where she was told the nurse would be back to see her after they had all the results in.

Another thirty minutes passed, feeling like thirty hours, and the nurse never came. She asked the bored receptionist whether she had been forgotten about, and he shrugged, repeating that the nurse would be back to see her shortly.

Another thirty minutes and it definitely felt like an experiment with her patience, but she figured that an hour of waiting was nothing when she would hopefully have months of time under their care, should she have passed the tests. Finally, a woman walked out of a room adjacent to the reception and made a b-line towards Sarah. She was in her late forties, well dressed, with manicured nails and an overpriced haircut. She confirmed Sarah's name, even though Sarah was the only one waiting, and ushered her out of the reception area. The room contrasted with the rest of the dull white walls and sparse furnishings of the facility. It contained a lavish selection of hand-crafted furniture, ornate art, the sum total of which Sarah assumed was more than her inheritance and the insurance payout put together. Objects d'art lay on mahogany pedestals at each corner of the room, chips and imperfections in their texture giving Sarah the impression that they were hand-carved. The sole purpose of the furniture and art seemed to be to impart wealth. Adding to that was an obscenely expensive-looking video wall behind the desk, with LEDs so small that even a few feet away it looked like a window. The skyline of London was displayed on the screen in ultra high definition, to create the illusion of being in a corner office up on high. Whoever this woman was, Sarah assumed she was used to finer things, and no doubt had a corner office that she was attempting to replicate within the confines of the dull and drab business park on the outskirts of the city. The woman gestured for Sarah to take a seat, and introduced herself.

“Marion Whark.” she said, with a smile that was anything but genuine. The lack of lines accompanying the curvature of her lips made it seem like a rare experience for her face.

“Nice to meet you.” said Sarah, attempting to be genial and mask finding the woman and her choice of aesthetics off-putting.

“Could you tell me a little about yourself?” asked Whark, as she leafed through Sarah's file.

“Well, I'm twenty-seven.” said Sarah. “I work as a volunteer for a homeless shelter and asylum seeker support.”

“More specifically, about your drug use.” said Whark, not even attempting to hide her disinterest in Sarah's occupation.

“Well...” Sarah started, hesitantly “I mostly used psychedelics, or psychoactives, whatever you want to call them...”

“Which drugs specifically?” asked Whark, the smile was creeping back up her face, as if warming to the girl whose life she had only just attempted to ignore.

“LSD, mushrooms, mescaline, peyote, DMT, 2CB, uh...” she struggled to recall others. “Does marijuana count? I did Ayahuasca once or twice.”

“You can stop there, that's a fabulous selection.” said Whark, almost sounding impressed.

“I wouldn't call it fabulous...” said Sarah.

“Oh, but it is for our requirements in this study. You're exactly the type of candidate we're after.”

“It is? I am?” said Sarah, confused.

“Very much so. And you're in great health, have you taken part in a clinical trial before?”

“I'm sorry...” said Sarah, backtracking. “What makes me a great subject?”

“For this particular testing regime, we're after subjects that have had experience with psychoactive substances, whose neural pathways have been altered. You know how LSD was used medically for a time, to help patients with schizophrenia? We're trying something along those lines, albeit with normal patients in this round, rather than locking up a group of crazies together!”

She appeared to think she was making a joke. Sarah smiled politely.

“We have a new three-month study starting in just two weeks, is that enough time to put your affairs in order?”

It sounded to Sarah like Whark was implying she wouldn't be coming out of the experiment alive – but she quashed those feelings – this was a multinational corporation after all, they couldn't advertise on the tube and then kill subjects. Probably.

Sarah told her it was plenty of time. It wasn't like she had any actual life waiting for her when she returned. Whark made her sign a consent form and an initial Non Disclosure Agreement before giving her more information about the study. It would be taking place just outside of Dundee. They would provide her with a ticket for the train and collect her from the station. She only needed clothes for arrival and departure, they would be providing her things to wear whilst she was there – albeit unflattering cuts – which seemed important to Whark. She was to be reimbursed with twelve thousand pounds for her time, which would be deposited on the final day of the trial.

Sarah feigned interest in the information that was being imparted, caring less for the cash lump sum, and more focused on imagining the final day of her emergence from the depths of the APEX machine.

Seventeen weeks and one day earlier, Sarah didn't know or care much about APEX, other than it being the company her parents had worked for before their deaths. She had been gallivanting around their old house in a mushroom daze, and other than having relocated their books, it was pretty much exactly as they had left it. She had recently taken to tripping there amongst her parent's belongings, it was giving her a feeling of closeness to them that she hadn't had for a long time.

Whilst going through her father's desk, she came across a USB pen drive which she plugged into her laptop, hoping it wasn't a secret stash of porn. As she started going through the thousands of documents on the drive, the visuals of her trip dissipated, the high diminished, and for the first time in ten years she felt something close to sober.

She signed up to NA later that day to keep that feeling, keep her focus for the task ahead. What she had found blew her mind, and made her question whether her parents' death was an accident as she had been led to

believe. There were confessions from her mother and father, and files upon files to back up their claims.

They were going to whistleblow on their employers, take the stash of documents stolen from the company and hand them over to WikiLeaks. There was proof of hidden accounts, illegal experiments, arms deals, black budgets and more. She had thought about just sending the data off and wrapping up their mission, but it was all at least a decade old, and would likely be shrugged off by the multinational demon. Blamed on former executives and disgraced employees. This trial, however, might make that data worth something. She'd be in the belly of the beast. A testing facility probably had records of patients past, and if the current experiment wasn't above board, it might implicate the company with *recent* proof that would only emphasise the content in the archive her parents had amassed.

She wished she had been more industrious ten years ago. That would have been the perfect time to strike, but now she had a chance to finish what her parents started. Sarah thought again of Whark's question about "putting her affairs in order", and recalled an experiment in which the paperwork declared all the subjects were deemed '*unsuitable for return to society*'. The account of the trial continued to talk about the results of the experiment itself, with no explanation of what happened to the subjects, and they weren't spoken of in any of the other documentation. She tried to put it out of her mind. Concentrating on her task ahead and the day, three months and two weeks away, when she would emerge from their testing facility with a smoking gun, completing the mission her parents didn't have a chance to see through before their unceremonious 'departure' from the company.

Sarah tried to shrug off the fact that she didn't have a plan beyond sending the documents to WikiLeaks. She knew her quest for vengeance was a tall order, and possibly out of a sense of psychedelically enhanced Batman-style justice, but she had literally nothing else to dedicate her life to, so why not this.

Putting her life on hold was tragically easy. Sarah had expected as much, but still felt disheartened that all she had going on in her life were two volunteering gigs and NA. She was secretly glad to have an out from the homeless shelter and asylum seekers support. At first, helping out at the homeless shelter was a ruse. Whilst trying to track down one of her parents' former colleagues, she discovered that was where he had ended up. She spent weeks surreptitiously gaining his trust whilst fleecing him for information to corroborate the evidence she already had. Having lost his job only a few years after her parents death, he wasn't an awful lot of use, but she managed to get confirmation of a few scant details from the files. Sarah ended up continuing to help out at the shelter despite getting all she could from him. It felt like it was the least she could do.

She knew how easily she could have ended up homeless if she didn't have the insurance money to keep her going, and had friends on the party circuit that were trapped in that lifestyle, squatting buildings and begging. They were perfectly lovely, joyous people, but she didn't want to become like that. Her colleagues at asylum seekers support were sad to find out she would be leaving them soon, but as with the homeless shelter, it was a means to an end. She had heard about refugees being helped at the support centre and knew it was her only chance to have direct contact with people who had experienced the brutality of APEX's military wing. She befriended women and children who had seen what the company's weapons had done to their friends and families, been told tales of contaminated water and plagues wiping out crops and livestock. It hadn't provided any evidence, but it had put a fire in her belly, given her memories she could draw on if she ever felt like giving up.

With little to do before the next NA session, she decided to return to Shadwell. The posters for the clinical trial had stopped appearing on the tube, so either they had slashed their advertising budget, or hit their quota of potential subjects.

Sarah wasn't surprised when she followed the route to the business park and discovered that the unit previously taken up by the testing facility was vacant. The gleaming new signage gone, through the window it looked like no one had ever been there, and a 'for rent' sign sat in the window. She was amazed that they had literally dragged an MRI machine into a building for a day or two of appointments, but reasoned that when money was no object, why would a thing like that even matter.

Arriving late to NA after her deviation on the DLR, she walked in just in time to hear the culmination of one of Charlotte's awful stories about her dalliances in prostitution. This was a new one to Sarah, but they all had the same swift descent.

“So this new pimp drove me to the man's hotel, he was Eastern European or Middle Eastern or somthin'. Nice and all, but then he started gettin' rough, wouldn't let me go, an' I slap him, so he hits me back and keeps hittin' me, fucks me bareback even though he knows that ain't what I do, an then 'fore I know it, he ain't payin' and kicks me out! My man's waitin' in the car an' I get in, he don't care that I covered in blood an' shit, he rags on me for not havin' the cash, then goes back at the hotel, an' gets kicked out by security. He was real mad, made me do two jobs for free t'make it up t'him.”

The story didn't seem to have a point other than to let Charlotte remind herself that she's better off sober, and to perhaps discourage the others from entering prostitution.

Sarah hated the stories because Charlotte had got clean so many times only to fall back down the rabbit hole. It felt like watching a cautionary tale on repeat, and she knew that deep down she had the same weakness, a trigger somewhere inside that might get pulled at any moment and put her back on the psychedelic party train. The mission gave her focus, but she feared it might not be enough. She sat through the rest of the session, saying nothing, despite Bobby's glances of encouragement. There was nothing *to* say. Even after the session, she couldn't find words to tell him what she was going to do.

“What's goin' on, kid?” he asked.

“I...” Sarah tried to think of a lie, but it wasn't coming. “You know how you said I should get a job?” she said, stalling.

“Yeah, how's that goin'?”



“Really well.” she said. “I think I got one. But it's up in Scotland and starts in a week and a bit.”

“Yeah? That's great! What kinda work y'be doing?” he asked, leading her into another quandary.

She thought about the actual 'job' and her mission. Neither could be discussed, but she intended to take a lot of books with her, and that could form the basis of a mostly-truthful lie.

“Research, I guess you'd call it? I don't really know too much about it yet, still waiting on all the information.”

“Research sounds good. You been sayin' you wanted t'do some readin', right?”

“Yeah, it's pretty perfect, hopefully. Change of scenery will be nice, maybe.” Sarah stifled a smile at her own comment, knowing that the scenery would most likely be the concrete walls of a medical facility somewhere in the middle of a dull, grey industrial estate.

She continued to throw vague details at him, trying to pepper lies with truth so she'd have some chance of remembering them should he ask for more information in future. Three more sessions until she left. Three more times she'd have to lie to her sponsor's face. She didn't like having to do it, but after what happened to her parents and their colleague, didn't want to involve anyone else.

The rest of the two weeks before her departure were spent packing and repacking her case. The single change of clothes for her return was mostly acting as ballast for a grand stack of books, the selection of which she couldn't decide upon. In the end, she opted for a good mix of political philosophy and existentialism. Mill, Marx, Locke, Hume, Sartre, Berlin, Nietzsche, Kafka and Rousseau. The books had felt intimidating in the past, but now she believed she could turn their thick hardback covers without anxiety. On top of those lay lighter reading, in the form of classics she knew she should have read by now. Dickens, Bronte, Hemingway, some of the shorter Tolstoys, Twain, Cervantes, Swift, Carroll, Stevenson, and a giant tome of the complete works of Wilde. The sides of the case were buffered with more recent fiction, and finally a copy of Dianetics and The Book Of Mormon, which Sarah figured might both be good for a laugh.

The train to Perth, which Sarah learned was adjacent to Dundee, was just shy of seven hours with a change at Haymarket. Whilst she waited

impatiently to board, Sarah decided to check out the actual cost of the ticket and was blown away when the National Rail app told her it was £175. Glad she wasn't paying for it, Sarah wondered if there wasn't a plane to Scotland that was significantly cheaper. The paranoid whispers returned, reminding her that a plane would have a manifest or list of passengers, a ticket that would have to be in her name, she'd have to show identification. There would be a record of her journey, should she not return, whilst a train required none of that. As the doors finally opened for her, and the scant few other passengers to board, she hushed the paranoia and took a seat. It would be four and a half hours until she had to change, and she decided to spend the time getting stuck in to one of the many heavy books she was now regretting taking.

Despite her case having wheels, it was still an uncomfortable weight to pull, let alone drag up the stairs at Euston. Sitting in her reserved seat, Sarah dug deep into the bag, picking a hardback at random, letting fate decide her literary companion for the journey. Destiny chose John Stuart Mill, and as she leafed through the pages whilst the train rolled out of London, the rhetoric and occasional famous quote was already weighing heavily on her eyelids.

She awoke almost two hours later to green rolling hills passing by. Not wanting to waste her journey or pull out of her promise to herself, she looked in the bag and found the copy of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* that Bobby had given to her at the last NA meeting, hoping it wouldn't have the same narcoleptic effect as *On Liberty*. It came with his staunch recommendation, and although she wasn't convinced that she was the target audience for a lauded work of science fiction, Bobby's description caught her attention.

"It's about this guy who lives outside the system, right? Had everythin' taken from him, who he was, or who he thought it was. An' then he gets the chance to get it back, by doin' this sort-of heist, goin' to a space station or somethin' and getting this data that'll change the world."

It sounded like the perfect subject matter to be reading whilst preparing herself for the mammoth task ahead of her, scamming the DemonCorp to let her walk straight in through their doors and come out with their most precious and implicating of information.

Sarah was already half-way through it when the train pulled in to Haymarket. Having twenty minutes before the train to Perth, she decided to waste time exploring the station and grab herself a coffee. Walking out onto the concourse, she was surrounded by a hundred dialects of Scottish that she instantly fell in love with. Each had their own nuance, and Sarah had no idea which part of the country they originated from, but they could at least be determined as 'of Scotland', whereas in London she could rarely tell where anyone hailed from.

The next train took her an hour across Scotland, the accents following her through the country. She smiled at their idioms and occasional incomprehensibilities, whilst keeping her nose deep in the book. As they pulled into the station, she discovered that the coffee was mostly still full, and despite it being luke warm, took it with her to the meeting point. A giant bald man in a suit was waiting with her name on a sign, standing in front of a matte black Bentley. She smiled politely as she approached him, he was standing steadfast in a tailored suit that accentuated the curves of his over-worked musculature. He looked like a wrestler who had chosen the unintimidating moniker of 'The Chauffeur'. As he drove her out of the station, she wondered what his walk-on music might be. Gary Neuman's Cars was probably a little too new-wave or synthy to be a tune for a wrestler. Perhaps, she mused, there was a dubstep remix of Iggy Pop's The Passenger that could suffice.

The Chauffeur didn't say anything as they left the city, winding through the countryside towards their destination – wherever that might be – and Sarah didn't feel the need to initiate conversation with the hulking giant. After forty minutes of yet more reading, which Sarah was proud of herself for, they pulled up to an entrance surrounded by a tall metal fence. Giant metal gates were dragged open by black-clad guards and the driver continued onwards past a series of cylindrical buildings that looked like oversized tin cans half-buried on their sides. It wasn't anything like Sarah imagined a clinical or medical facility might look like, it seemed almost military. She checked APEXMaps, and discovered that their location was Cultybraggan, a former POW camp that was occupied by the military until 2004, at which point it was abandoned and went up for sale. She continued to scan through the Wikipedia article and went through photos of the place as they pulled up to a hill that seemed innocuous enough, if it wasn't for the

six *other* matte black Bentleys outside. They parked up in line with the other cars, and the illusion of the hill being just a hill was truly broken. The centre carved out, stone walls on either side, a halogen-lit tunnel at the centre leading to a large door going directly into the hillside. Sarah reached for the door handle and discovered that she was locked in.

“S'not time yet, Miss.” said the Giant from his seat at the front. He didn't bother explaining further, and Sarah didn't imagine he'd answer any questions she might have.

She opened her book and tried to read, but the words weren't sticking in her head, anxiety and paranoia nagging at her that she had made a huge mistake.

Ten minutes passed – feeling like ten hours – and finally a seventh car pulled up in line with the rest of them. With a ubiquitous *click*, all the doors unlocked, and one by one the passengers emerged and looked around their surroundings.

“May I have your attention?”

They all turned to see Whark making her way out of the tunnel, silhouetted by halogen glow until she emerged into the remnants of daylight. “We're so very glad to have you here” she said, her lips in an upward lilt, but eyes betraying her lack of emotion. “If you'll follow me through, we'll get you settled in.”

She began to walk back down the tunnel, whilst Sarah and her six fellow subjects grabbed their cases and bags, attempting to keep up with the swift strut of the woman ahead of them.

The long, dark hallway was illuminated by more halogen, with a gleaming red LED beaming from every corner and doorway at the base of a camera. Sarah tried to build a mental map of their placements along the corridor, but there were so many, she wondered if she'd ever be able to keep track of them.

*'Then again', she thought, 'There are so many of them, maybe they're duds, or perhaps monitored by a sleepy fat guard like in the movies, rather than an A-Eye system that never took breaks, never slept or ate or had one (or both) eyes on a football match...'*

They turned a corner to a door with a gleaming silver APEXsecurity pad built in to the handle. Whark placed her hand at the pad and it recognised her instantly, unlocking. She held the door open for the subjects. Inside was

a recreation room, bare concrete walls offset by a matte black vinyl floor. A giant television at the centre flanked on either side by shelves of game consoles from the last two decades, beneath them was physical media for the older consoles, whilst the newer ones were plugged in to external hard drives. VHS, DVD and DVR boxes sat below, underneath them were cabinets full of tapes and discs, more than enough media to keep them occupied for three months. Around the room were foosball, pool and ping pong tables, and couches with matching coffee tables lined the walls, interspersed with cabinets of art supplies, CDs, records and books. Sarah felt a little foolish for taking so many books, assuming many of the classics she was weighed down with were probably lining the shelves. Sitting on the pool table were seven piles of papers, which Whark instructed them to read and sign, additional terms and conditions and NDAs that needed to be addressed before they could continue. As Sarah leafed through them she wondered what would happen if she didn't sign, the legal wording was making her lids heavier than reading Mill on the train.

*'Would they send me back? Would they pay for my travel, drive me to the station, or would I be made to make my own way?'*

It wasn't an option. She had come too far, but she let her mind wander as the overcomplicated language washed straight over her head. She glanced at the others and watched as a tall, scrawny blonde man leafed through the pages, signing and initialling without reading. She envied how cavalier he was about it, but one by one their other companions followed suit, more concerned with getting inducted than being cautious. Sarah realised she was way behind the others, still reading rather than signing, and gave in, signing everything rather than dredging through the purposefully archaic and elongated linguistic choices of the A-Pharma lawyers. Whark collected the papers and held them under her arm as she took the group on a tour of the facility. Showing them the mess hall where they'd have all their meals, a long, thin room with twelve metal tables lined up in a grid, as if prepared to feed an army. Next she took them to the door to the testing area which was off-limits without an escort, and finally the living quarters. Contrary to the name, the room did *not* look suitable for the living. Metal bunks lined one wall, hues of gleaming aluminium surrounded by yet more concrete. The floors were shiny, smooth, warm to the touch, but the whole room gave Sarah the impression that whoever decorated it had a sideline in furnishing

morgues. Sterile looking shower cubicles lay beyond the bunks, lined with octagonal tiles of the same personality-devoid grey as the walls.

“Dinner will be in half an hour. Unpack your belongings, relax and enjoy your night. I'll see you in the morning.”

She walked off with a smile that wasn't a smile, leaving Sarah to wonder where *she* would be having dinner, assuming she was living on-site.

The others had packed a lot less than Sarah, and the tall blonde man, who introduced himself as Micah, ribbed her for her massive collection of books which would have all fit on a Kindle with room to spare. She smiled and gave him a generic response about liking the texture and smell of musty old paper rather than a little book-robot, but felt a little dumb for not having thought of it. Micah's luggage consisted of laptops and tablets, all self-built, which Sarah found impressive for a guy just a few years older than herself. She assumed that, like the guy who made her laptop, those who could custom build and 3D-print computer parts lived in some far corner of the internet, rather than being real people that were thin enough to fit through the door to leave their house. He told her his plan was to spend the next three months taking apart an APEX operating system on what he called an 'air gapped' laptop, and see just how much data they were still gleaming from their users. He had been a part of Anonymous since he was eleven, and she didn't really have a response to that, other than a polite smile and expression of “Wow, pretty young.”.

A bell chimed across a speaker system that sounded like it was built into the walls, alerting them that dinner was to be served. They tried to navigate their way through the labyrinthine hallways back to the mess hall. By the time they arrived, a buffet of hot food was steaming away at the far side of the room. Passing tables upon tables, they discovered a selection of four options for a main meal, two marked as vegetarian, a series of side dishes and a salad bar. Each filled up their plates, and sat at a table together.

Peering around over small-talk, they noticed there were only six of them, and looked around the room to discover a chubby Chinese guy sitting right at the far side of the room at a table all alone, cackling to himself for being ridiculous. He took his plate and rejoined them, introducing himself to those he hadn't spoken to as Pete. His parents wanted him to be an economist, because he was born Chinese and his parents, who he assured everyone were *also* Chinese, were fond of stereotypes. He chuckled to

himself as he retold a practised and crafted tale of how he explained to his parents he was not going to be an economist, and instead chose the dual occupations of 'stand-up comedian and professional homosexual'. When asked, Pete confessed that the stand-up career wasn't going so great as the homosexuality, but figured that the next three months could give him enough material to come out with a killer show for the Edinburgh festival next year, which was also where most of his money from the trial would be burnt. After twenty minutes, Pete quieted down to let the others talk about themselves, occasionally throwing in witticisms and semi-comedic observations about their lives.

Farah was a secularised Muslim nurse who was going to use the money to help get her six and seven year old cousins out of Iran.

“To start an adorable intifada?”, asked Pete, to awkward smiles. Alex introduced herself in a West Coast twang as “A half-black asexual transwoman”. She had decided when she started transitioning that it was better to start conversations with a label prescribed to herself, before anyone else could. Pete didn't have a joke about her, admitting that when he first saw her he just thought she was a gorgeous tall and muscular woman. Alex smiled at his compliment, and Micah came out with a slew of questions about the transitioning process. He had never met a transgender person, let alone one having to pay for their treatment themselves under the American health system, and was fascinated in both the psychology and the medical aspects of the process. To Sarah, it seemed that Alex had dealt with the questions a thousand times over, but she took them graciously, and with more patience than Sarah could imagine having. After the round of questions ended, Alex thanked Micah for not asking about her genitals, which prompted Pete to inquire “So, do you have an innie or an outie?” Alex threw a bread roll at his face, and it bounced somewhere across the room whilst the group laughed.

Sarah noticed that a shy-looking blonde at the far end of the group was politely smiling, but seemed uncomfortable at the talk of transitioning and homosexuality. Sarah moved to the seat next to her and introduced herself. The blonde, Leah, was a Catholic and confided in Sarah that she had never had a conversation with a gay person, let alone a transwoman. She was finding being in Alex's presence a little overwhelming, let alone the idea of living with them for the next three months. Sarah assured her



that it was going to be fun, that they'd all be the best of friends before she knew it, despite their differences. The seventh member of the group joined the two of them, introducing himself as Rob. He reassured Leah that she'd get used to it. Up until a few years ago he had been a Born-Again Christian, and when he got out, was blown away by the world of sexualisation and gender options.

“So, now you're an aborted Christian?” asked Pete, joining the conversation to awkward silence.

“And the crowd goes mild!” he added. “They can't all be gold nuggets, can they...”

Smiles crawled up his audience's faces as he slowly stepped away from the table in a shameful backwards dawdle, bumping in to the table behind him and falling onto it with exaggerated motions, landing flat on his back with his hands posed like a corpse in a cartoon.

The seven of them lingered in the mess hall until a bell chimed through the walls, encouraging them off to bed. There were no windows deep in the bunker, no way to tell whether it was day or night outside. The conversation dwindled as they got into bed and the lights slowly dimmed, as if based on a pressure sensor in the bunks, reacting to each of them lying horizontal.

Sarah sighed, unsure if she was anywhere close to fatigued, and listened to the room tone. It was deathly silent but for a soft drone of something mechanical, accompanied by subtle vibrations that harmonised with one another. She tried to make it out, whether it was from some kind of machinery, air filtration unit or music from an adjacent room. It was barely audible, even when she pressed her ear to the wall to see if it was coming out of the speaker system. Laying back in bed, she looked at the red LEDs staring at the room from either corner. Her mission was going to be harder than she imagined it might be, but she had three months to build a mental map of the facility before it was time to strike. Three months to work out where incriminating files were, and where the camera feeds were accumulated to disable or delete the records of her infiltration. That would all have to wait, of course. For the next day the clinical trial was to begin.

The lights in the living quarters slowly came to life, illuminating the sleeping subjects in their beds. Alex stirred, to discover that Leah was already awake, reading from a book in the dark. A chime reverberated through the walls, waking the others apart from Pete, who was snuggled up in a ball deep under the covers. Micah threw a pillow at his head to force him from his slumber, as they all went through to the showers and got themselves ready for whatever the testing would entail. After emerging clean and fresh for the first day of the trial, they discovered blue hospital-style scrubs were waiting for them to change into.

Clad in blue, unflattering cuts as Whark promised, they were taken to the mess hall by two large bald orderlies that Sarah thought looked like her chauffeur, but dressed-down in light grey shirts and slacks under white doctor style coats.

After breakfast the giant men led the group to the rec room, where they imparted monosyllabic instructions to wait. Leah had brought her bible, but Rob distracted her from it, sparking a conversation about the differences between the Christianity in the book and how it was actually enacted in the real world. She tried to vaguely defend the acts of previous Popes, the religious right in America, and even The Crusades, but his arguments and reasoning for leaving the faith were based on fact and logic, backed up with quotes from the bible. He used Pete as an example of how being gay didn't make him a bad person.

“Look at him, he's just like anyone else you know, except for his sexual preferences. Being gay isn't *actually* a sin in the bible, it's mentioned twice in Leviticus, 'you must not have intercourse with a man as one has with a woman', and it says that again within a few chapters of the first mention. Now, bear in mind that Leviticus is the third book of the *Old* Testament, and Christianity is based on the *New* Testament. You don't see modern Christians abstaining from pork or shellfish, only eating fish that have both fins *and* scales, or not mixing wool and linen in clothing... It's

something that people have added over the years, amended or mistranslated from the original text.”

Leah held the book tight in her hands, her eyes skittering away from Rob.

“Have you ever been to The British Museum in London?” he asked. She shook her head. “They have the world's oldest bible there, and you have no idea how different it is to the King James. There's a copy online too, and it's full of '*corrections*', maybe twenty-five thousand, I think? There's always been amendments to the bible, and as things become en vogue or hate-able, the bible is often amended to include or exclude those things. Think about the Pope, this pope has spent the last ten plus years changing the church, rejecting the wealth and regalia of the title, and living a humble and *real* life. Changing the doctrines and dogma to allow for contraception, abortions, homosexuality, he's tried to reduce inequality and profiteering in the church, whilst in England every cathedral has a cafe and a gift shop... Do you remember what Jesus said to the traders in the temple?” Leah was feeling uneasy, but had the Sunday School answer that came out almost subconsciously.

“Stop making my father's house a marketplace?”

“Exactly.” said Rob with a smile and kind eyes.

Leah looked into them and could tell his words weren't coming from a place of judgement, his lecture was heartfelt, from a man who had devoted his life to something that had betrayed him in some way, and he was trying to help her. She loosened her grip on the bible, and engaged him in conversation, wanting to know more about his real-world bible thoughts.

Sarah observed the conversation in her periphery as she leafed through the final chapters of *Neuromancer*, whilst Pete and Micah played pool, and Alex and Farah started making their way through a box set of *Bridezillas*.

“Read any other Gibson?” asked Micah, after missing a shot and rescinding the table to Pete.

“This is my first.” said Sarah. Since meeting him, she had jumped to the assumption that Micah would have been a Gibson fan.

“Oh, you're in for a treat. You gonna do the whole Matrix trilogy?” He asked.

“No, God no, I try not to think about the other two existing.” she said.

“Shit, not The Matrix movies, the rest of the *Neuromancer* trilogy, it's all set around The Cyberspace Matrix and The Sprawl.”

“I didn't know it was a trilogy...” she said, half-wishing she had the other books, as she had little left of the one in her hands, and was in love with the world and characters.

“I've got them on my Kindle if you want to have a read – got his whole back catalogue – assuming you don't mind sacrificing the smell and texture of real books for a robot one.” he smiled, ribbing her in a way that reminded her of Bobby.

“Sure, I'll make the sacrifice.” she said, her words lost amidst a chime through the walls as the orderlies stepped back into the room.

“Alex Scott?” said the one on the left, who Sarah couldn't tell apart from the one on the right.

Alex made herself known and they took her out into the hallway towards the first session of the trial. The others went back to their activities whilst they waited for their turn to be called.

An hour and a half later, Alex was brought back in and it was Pete's turn. Ninety minutes more and it was Farah, then Leah, and finally Sarah's. She followed the giant footsteps of the near-identical hairless orderlies, whom she had decided to nickname '*Balderlies*', along the corridor. They reached for the gleaming security pad, unlocking the door to the testing section of the facility, and she tried to add the twists and turns of the hallways to her mental map along with the placement of the cameras, but it was starting to get confusing. She felt like the walk, which had taken five minutes, was going round in circles, as if they were intentionally misleading her map. Finally, they came to a door, which Sarah was certain was at the end of the first corridor they walked down, but couldn't be certain. They ushered her inside, where the nurse from the facility in Shadwell was waiting for her, with a big beaming smile on her face. She sat Sarah down on a big leather chair at the centre of the room, computers and machinery flanking it against the walls, and told her to get comfortable as she placed electrodes on her head.

“Are you ready?” asked the nurse.

Sarah wasn't sure what answer she was expecting other than the inevitable “Yes.”

The nurse typed at a console by the wall and the chair slowly whirled, dropping back into a reclining position, laying almost completely horizontal, wires trailing from her head along the floor in various directions

to different machines that were monitoring her. Installed in the ceiling above was a large flatscreen television that burst to life with a video of a serene countryside scene, a river flowing, light breeze through the grass, sun setting off in the distance. Classical music started playing through the walls of the room. Sarah didn't recognise the music itself, but buried deep beneath the strings and horns were familiar noises from the walls of the living quarters. A whir with harmonious tones, which were joined by deep rhythmical *thumps*, like the sounds of a robotic womb. The images on the screen dissolved into scenes of a happy family with a young girl having a picnic in a park, then on to a flashy sports car driving on a mountain road, and a magnificent yacht rolling across an azure ocean. The music transitioned into darker realms, picking up a minor key, imagery changing to follow suit. Storm clouds rolled across an urban cityscape, starving African children surrounded by flies and arid land, an ambulance crew trying to help the bleeding victim of a terrible car wreck. The music went even darker, sharp piercing strings, thunderous drums bellowing, the video dissolving further into more disturbing territories. War torn villages of terrified people, lines of refugees, scenes from the holocaust. In an instant, it shifted back to light music and a deer in a lush forest, then straight back to shrill tones and decaying flesh. Sarah watched the scenes play out as the orchestral score darted back and forth, the tones hidden beneath the music staying consistent throughout. She wondered what they were monitoring with the electrodes.

*'Is it to gauge my emotional reactions? Or maybe it's designed to map my neural pathways or whatever, see how damaged my brain is from the substance abuse?'*

The ninety minutes of the test flew by, which was surprising, given her Persisting Perception Disorder. Before Sarah knew it, the music and imagery came to an end and the chair returned to its upright position. She looked over to the nurse and caught her taking earplugs out. Sarah wanted to ask her about them, whether they were to protect her from the volume of the music, or from whatever was buried in the tones underneath, but didn't in case it drew attention to her. The nurse disconnected the electrodes, and the Balderlies were waiting at the door to take her back through the corridors. They took a path that Sarah was almost certain was different to the one they led her down originally. Returning her to the rec room, Rob

was asked to follow them for his first session. Three hours later he and Micah were done with their sessions, and just as Micah was about to resume his game of pool, Whark entered the room, commanding their attention.

“How are we all feeling this afternoon?” she asked. They all responded with nods, agreements of good vibes and smiles which she mirrored falsely.

“Marvellous.” she said, standing at the door as an awkward silence fell on the room, as if she was monitoring their reactions. “If you'd like to come with me, I believe you're all ready for the first round of drugs.” She led them out, followed by the orderlies, and Sarah recalled Whark's statement about how her psychedelic experiences were helpful to the trial, and tried to broach the subject with the others.

“So, have you all... uh... indulged in psychoactive substances?”

“Yeah, of course.” said Micah. “How else you gonna get by in this cruel hard world...”

“I've done shrooms a few times.” said Alex.

“God, I loved shrooms as a kid.” added Rob “But after getting back out into the world, I fell in love with Mescaline. That's some gorgeous shit. Never laughed so hard in my life.”

“Where the hell did you find Mescaline?” asked Pete. “I was lucky if my guy could fill my, uh, '*prescription*' for 2CB... he usually just sold me ex and told me it was 2C.”

The rest of their twisting and turning walk through the hallways was spent going back and forth about which drugs they loved and what combination was best. Sarah enjoyed the conversation more than she expected. It had been nineteen weeks of sobriety, not being able to revel in the good times with narcotics. Even though she knew being clean was the right decision, it was nice to reminisce. Through the whole discussion, Leah wasn't involving herself in the conversation, and once again Sarah thought it looked like she was feeling like an outsider.

“Are you ok?” Sarah asked the timid blonde.

“Yeah...” she said, sheepishly, eyes to the floor. “I just never had any... y'know, experiences with these things.”

Sarah wasn't sure what to make of Leah's inexperience with drugs. Whark had seemed so pleased at how Sarah had screwed up her brain with

chemicals, and yet one of their number was entirely inexperienced. Maybe, she thought, they needed a subject that was clean, as some kind of comparison or baseline for whatever they were going to be testing them with. She considered asking Leah why she signed up for the testing at all, as it seemed like it would be the type of thing a staunch Catholic wouldn't be in favour of, but decided the shy girl would probably be made even more uncomfortable by the line of questioning, and it would probably come out as their time together continued.

Whark led the group into a large bright room where they each had a chair of their own, and were hooked up to IV bags whilst the room tones droned softly in the background. Sarah ignored the drug conversation that was continuing amongst the others and tried to make out the drug name that was written on the bag. It was facing away from her, and the letters were distorted through the clear fluid. She watched the Balderlies in her periphery and waited for them to turn their heads to confirm that they, like the nurse, were wearing earplugs. Now certain it was to do with the noises she could hear in the background, as if they were part of the trial, maybe more so than the drugs that were dripping down into their veins. The conversation petered out and the group sat in silence for the next thirty minutes as the fluids drained into their system. Once the bags were dry, they were told that was it for the day, and for the week as far as clinical studies were concerned. Taken back to the mess hall, they discovered smoothies were waiting for them at their table. Sipping them over dinner, each noted a chemical twang in the aftertaste. Micah noted that it tasted familiar.

“Reminds me of a nootropic I took for a while, Aniracetam or maybe it was Pramiracetam.”

The others hadn't heard of either.

“It's meant to be a smart drug.” he explained.

“Smart drug, like the drug is intelligent, or smart drug like it makes *you* smart?” asked Pete, with a big goofy smile on his face.

“The latter.” Micah confirmed. He said he had found it online from some guys in Silicon Valley and used it for six or so months to try and learn some new programming languages, but had tapered off after a while. It made him feel a little bit like an automaton, rather than a human being. The others discussed whether that was part of the drug regime. None of them



knew the actual purpose of the clinical trial, and questioned whether it was some new intelligence-stimulating concoction.

“You think it's tied in to the sounds in the walls?” asked Alex.

The others had all been wondering the same thing, but none of them had spoken up. The tones, whatever they were, had been following them from room to room, whispering to them in the background of every conversation, an undercurrent of noise stalking their every step.

Turning in for the night, they each listened intently to the sounds, mechanical womb noises, and drifted off only to wake the next day to the same tones.

The rest of the week was, as promised, free from tests. They had two smoothies a day, at breakfast and dinner, and at lunch were presented with two clear gelatine capsules of white powder to accompany their meal.

“This seems a little excessive, doesn't it?” Farah asked. “IV bags, pills, and drugs in smoothies? Do you think one of them is the real drug, and the rest are just placebos?”

“Why would they do that?” asked Rob.

“Secrecy.” said Micah. He had a semi-informed opinion based on spending far too much time trawling Reddit. “Pharmaceutical companies have to keep this kind of shit secret, even if we sign NDAs and they probably did background checks, they don't know that one of us isn't here under false pretences, working for a rival company or whatever. Giving us at least three drugs, not to mention the weird sounds in the walls, we won't know which the real test is, assuming any of them are real...”

Conspiracy theories started to make their way back and forth across the table, but Sarah was in a world of her own. She hadn't thought about background checks. All the company would have had to do was look at the electoral roll or do a quick search online, let alone glimpse at their own database of employee births or next of kin. They'd probably have the names of her parents in seconds, and she'd be revealed. But, she reasoned, maybe a familial tie to the company wasn't enough to send up red flags. They wouldn't know she had the files her parents stole, let alone that she harboured secret desires to bring the company down. She had done her best to make it appear like she was just a lost little girl trying to make some money with a potentially dangerous experiment. There was no reason they wouldn't believe that. Sarah returned to the conversation, laughing at Pete's

jokes, and nodding and querying further in to Micah's tidbits of information. She'd get through this if she just played along, blended in with all the others.

The rest of the week flew by faster than Sarah could have imagined, given her Persistently Perceptive condition. She wondered whether the drugs were curbing her skewed experience of time, and hoped that it would continue. She almost felt normal again, even the shimmers and glimmers in her field of view seemed less frequent and intense.

At the weekend, the whole group was taken to another test room deep in the depths of the bunker. They were each attached to electrodes and made to run on treadmills as their heart rates and brain patterns were monitored. Instructed to run faster and faster, harder and harder, past the point where they felt like they were going to collapse. Sarah felt like she was going to die, her heart punching hard in her chest, lungs begging her to stop so they could replenish themselves.

After two hours, Pete, Leah and Micah had already had enough, and Sarah's legs finally gave in. One of the Balderlies caught her as she fell, helping her over to a seat behind the remaining runners. She watched as the others gave up one at a time, some of them of their own accord, some falling and being caught as she had been. She thought about how far people would go for money, mulled on whether that was also part of the experiment. There were so many questions she had, and obviously nobody who worked for the company was going to answer them. All of the information and explanation was no doubt hidden in a room somewhere on the never-ending ouroboros of corridors, but no matter how many questions stacked up, she knew she couldn't risk looking for it so early in the trial. She'd just have to add this room to her mental map, another doorway to cross off the list she was struggling to keep track of.

As they all recovered in the rec room, Sarah was forcing her way through *The Communist Manifesto*, trying to balance her reading regime between fiction and something more intellectually substantial.

"Learnin' to be a Communist?" asked Alex, with a wry tone.

"Yeah, I'm also a Muslim and was born in Africa, despite what my birth certificate says..." she shot back, with a smile. Alex sat down next to her, and revealed genuine interest in the book.

“I read it years back, totally blew my mind. Y'know, when people talk about socialism back home, they always demonise it as Communism, but I didn't think it seemed that bad. Just meant equality, rather than, y'know, how things are now.”

“I bet England's just as bad though.” Sarah said.

Alex wasn't convinced. “I don't think the rich here have as many vested interests, like the senators that are on committees for climate change or whatever whilst being paid as 'consultants' by oil companies.”

“Yeah, I don't think that'd be tolerated here, although it's perfectly fine for the Prime Minister to be in bed with a media company...” Sarah trailed off, realising that she could very easily have said –

“Or a megacorp that creates phones and laptops and then spies on everyone who uses them...” Alex said, finishing the thought.

Sarah said nothing. She knew that someone was probably listening to, or monitoring their conversations in the facility, and if she responded at all, perhaps it would give away that she knew A-Pharma was part of APEX, which might raise suspicion about her presence.

“It's pretty fucked up.” she finally said.

“Yeah.” said Alex, noticing Sarah's mood change. She didn't want to push further. “Enjoy the book.” she said, getting up. “It's a tough slog, but worth it, even if we'll likely never get a real revolution. There's no proletariat any more... everyone strives for, or considers themselves bourgeoisie, and in the digital age we don't exactly have a 'means of production', because we don't make anything anymore!” She sauntered over to the couch in front of the television to join Farah and Leah, who were in the midst of the third season of *Bridezillas*. Sarah watched them over the top of her book.

“I can't believe how awful these people are.” she heard Leah say.

“That's kind of the point.” said Alex “Everyone loves to watch a trainwreck, or rubberneck at an accident on the highway.”

“You know, now I look at this...” said Farah. “The situation in Iran really doesn't seem that bad.”

Alex was quick to agree. “Yeah, my country likes to talk big about bringing democracy and all that jazz to the rest of the world, but they really should do something about the shit we have going on at our own doorstep.”

The women laughed, as the bride on the television threw a cake at a server because the frosting was *Powder Blue* instead of *Sky Blue*.

The next day they were taken straight from breakfast to a new room, which Sarah tried and almost instantly failed to add to her map. Everyone was still aching from overworking their muscles the previous day, but they were assured that this would be an easy session. The room itself was painted completely black, with seven massage tables in a line. They were instructed to lie face-down on the tables and put their heads in the holes at the end. They did so, and discovered that the head-holes went directly into a black box under the table.

“Mines not working...” said Pete.

The others looked up to see that the comedian was lying the wrong way on the table, his feet dangling into the hole where his head should be. The Balderlies were not entertained, and glared at him until he faced the correct way. They left the room as the mechanical womb sounds started churning away, increasing in volume with every ten minute loop. They all tried to speak, but found that they were paralysed by the noise, and even if they could say a word, the sounds soon became so loud that they wouldn't be able to hear one another.

They stared into the darkness ahead, each of them wondering what the hell they were meant to be looking at, when *BANG*, a bright light flashed in their eyes, the outline of a grid hanging in their vision amongst stars in the blackness.

Another cycle of the room noise and *BANG*, another flash, the grid returning for another ten to fifteen seconds.

This continued for the next two hours. Every ten minutes the tones would come to a crescendo and the image would be burnt into their retinas, each time remaining longer than the last. At the final play-through of the sounds, the flash blinded them one last time, and the noises came to a stop. They heard the door open, the *click-clack* of heels walk across the threshold, and the door close again. From the pitch blackness, Whark's voice sounded out.

“Would you all please be so kind as to sit up?”

They did so, the outline of the grid still stuck in their vision, hovering over wherever they looked. Whark dialled up the lights slowly, and they could

see one another again, under glimmers of the grid. She took the group through to an adjacent room and sat them down each at their own desk, instructing them to draw what they saw in the flash. It had been three minutes, and the remnants of the image were fading, but each of them did their best to try to recreate the outline of the grid that had been lightly seared into their subconscious. Whark collected them all and looked through the sketches. She seemed dissatisfied.

“Let's try that again.” she said, opening the door for them to return to the black room.

Another round of tones and flashes, the images staying with them longer and longer. After two hours Whark entered again, and brought them through to draw what they saw.

Seemingly annoyed, she put them through the process in the black room a third time, then a fourth, until the image was not just seared, but completely burnt into their minds. After the fourth round of drawing, Whark finally seemed happy with their sketches and sent them with the orderlies to the mess hall for dinner. None of them were feeling particularly hungry, and sipped at smoothies with reluctance, under the watchful eyes of their grey and white clad minders.

“What do you think that was?” asked Farah. “Why was it so important we remember that box?”

“Did you see a box? I saw a grid.” said Rob.

“It was like a grid, but I had circles in mine, like, I dunno, Iron Man's helmet or something.” said Pete.

“It looks like a UI.” said Micah.

“What's that?” asked Sarah.

“A User Interface.” said Alex, to a nod from Micah. “Like on your computer or your phone.”

“Why would they want us to be able to draw that?” asked Leah.

“That's just the question at the top of the pile, isn't it...” said Micah. They continued to sip at their smoothies in silence. Each acutely aware of the bitter chemical twang, and that they had literally no idea what they signed themselves up for.

The second week in the facility sped by. Every day involved rounds of flashes in the black room, each time emerging and drawing the grid with greater clarity. By the weekend they could all redraw it perfectly, and Micah recreated the layout on his laptop to confirm his suspicions, that it could function as a rudimentary user interface. The others crowded round whilst he populated it with basic applications, then threw it across to his tablet to look at it in a touchscreen view. Clicking through the menus he had populated with blank headings, he demonstrated that it felt like they should naturally go through to sub-menus, leading to what he called 'peripheral apps'. None of them wanted to approach the staff with queries. So the purpose of the UI, if that was what it was, still eluded them, and they were left to shoot speculation back and forth amongst themselves.

“Maybe they're turning us into human computers?” scoffed Pete.

“Humans are *technically* computers, biological ones at least.” said Micah.

“Oh *please*.” said Alex. “Don't give him some generic line about humans being computers, neurons being circuit boards... it's a hell of a difference calling people 'biological machines', and installing a user interface by which we can... what? Control the operating system? What the hell is the human OS?”

“Do you feel like asking them?” Micah asked, indicating to the red LED in the corner, hanging under the glass eye staring at them.

Alex was hesitant. “No... we'll find out when they're ready to tell us.”

At lunch, they discovered their drug regime had changed, and rather than two capsules to accompany their meal, they were given another smoothie, this one containing a different chemical twang to the ones that arrived with breakfast and dinner.

“Do you recognise the taste?” Sarah asked Micah.

He didn't. It wasn't anything like the nootropics he had experimented with in the past. Sweeter, with an almost synthetic citrus flavour.

"It's kinda like drinking a Glade plug-in!" Pete scoffed.

"Maybe this is something new," said Micah "Or something different. Perhaps the Nootropic smoothies are just a primer, and this is the actual thing we're here to test."

"Why would we need a primer?" Alex asked, but Micah had no answer.

As the second weekend continued, they all noted that the tones in the room had changed, less harmonious and more like pulses of digital noise grouped together in ten to fifteen second bursts. Each had found themselves lulled to sleep faster than the previous nights, and complained about waking up with a metallic taste in their mouths. At breakfast, Rob waited for the Balderlies to leave before speaking to the group in hushed tones.

"I think they're drugging us at night."

"What do you mean?" asked Leah, a tremble in her voice.

"That metal taste, I reckon it's from some kind of aerosol anaesthetic or something, knocking us out." he said.

"Why would they do that? They've already got our consent to take drugs..." said Farah.

"Maybe this is for something different. Maybe they're doing something to us in our sleep." said Micah.

"If I find some doctor's diddling me in my sleep, I will not be best pleased." said Pete, trying to crack a joke, but failing to raise even a smile from the others.

"So, how do we find out what they're doing to us?" asked Alex.

That night, they went to bed prepared for the gas. In the shower room as they brushed their teeth, they each soaked a hand towel in water and surreptitiously brought it back with them to the living quarters. Micah reasoned that breathing through it might filter out some of the gas, like they used to advise people to do when caught in a burning building. It wasn't quite the same as a tank of oxygen, but it was the only suggestion that had been offered from the group. Hiding the cloths under their duvets, they breathed through them, the metallic taste pervading, but less so than

without. They waited hours after the lights dimmed, fighting the notion of sleep, biting lips and tongues, digging nails into palms, trying to keep their brains ticking whilst the vapour sneaking through the moist fibres did its best to knock them out. They had no way of telling how much time had passed, let alone what time it was when the door to the living quarters finally unlocked. The familiar thumping footsteps of the Balderlies entering, accompanied by the *tak-a-tak-a* of small metallic wheels rolling on the tiled floor. None of them wanted to peek out from their covers and give themselves away, relying on the sounds to track the journey of the two men around the room. The footsteps and *tak-a-taks* of wheels stopped. Silence reigned over the dark bedroom.

“This the right one?” asked the first Balderly.

“Is it the Chinaman?” asked the second.

The first pulled back the covers, revealing Pete sleeping soundly, his cloth falling to the floor, having failed at its task.

“What is that, a blankee?” asked the second.

“Must be a China thing, always see those fuckers breathing through masks, don'cha?”

They lifted him up, placing him on the gurney they had wheeled in, pulling it back through the room to the door, where the second orderly placed his hand on the APEXsecurity pad, unlocking it. A surge of adrenaline pulsed through the remaining subjects, knowing they'd have to get to the door before it locked again, without the orderlies seeing them. The two gigantic men pushed Pete through the door and it started to swing shut behind them. Micah dashed out of bed and burst across the room, his bare feet *pitter-pattering* on the floor as he ran. The bulbs in the ceilings and walls started to slowly crawl to life. As he was within metres of the door, he dropped to his knees and slid across the remaining distance, reaching out and jamming his fingers in to the gap of the closing door. Knelt down, he was hidden below the line of sight of the orderlies were they to turn, and tried to keep his agony inaudible. The enormous men didn't look back to check the room or investigate why the lights were coming on. The sound of the wheels and their thumping feet slowly disappeared down the corridor.

“Ow fucking Ow, Ow, OW!” he finally gasped, as the others emerged from their beds to pull the door open.



“Everyone awake?” asked Alex, looking around. There were only three of them. Rob, Leah and Farah were fast asleep in their bunks.

“We better hurry.” said Micah. “If they get through the next door, we'll have no chance of following them.”

He left a cloth at the foot of the door to stop it from locking behind them, and they started making their way down the hall. Sarah was hesitant about joining them. This was exactly the type of attention-drawing she was trying to avoid, but figured that they'd already have seen her being awake with the others on the cameras. If there was a group led by another subject, it hardly implicated her as any kind of ringleader, which she certainly wasn't. They sneaked down the hallway following the sounds of the Balderlies, staying behind corners and hiding, rushing forwards as soon as their quarry turned a corner. As they came to the door to the testing area, Micah used the run-and-slide technique he deployed previously. Once again he volunteered to have his fingers jammed in a door, but it got them deeper into the labyrinth, and he seemed to think it was worth the short-term pain. The Balderlies took a direct route with the gurney. In hushed tones, Alex reasoned that without a conscious subject they didn't have to twist and turn to get to wherever they were going. Sarah was comforted that she wasn't alone in thinking that they had been taken on over-long routes around the testing facility, that it wasn't her imagination playing tricks on her.

Pete was pushed in to a room and the group hung back to see if anyone further was coming or going, in case someone spotted them. Minutes later, the Balderlies left the room and walked away. This time Alex took the hit, and slid across the floor to keep the door open. The others tip-toed down the hall to join her, and peered through the crack in the door. Inside was a surgical suite, Pete lying unconscious at the centre of the room, his legs up in stirrups as the nurse and a doctor started a procedure, ordering a surgical robot to make a small incision. Monitors above them displayed the path of a minute camera that crawled through a slit in his testicles made by the scalpel. Ahead of it was a tiny snake-like robotic arm which glided through Pete's blood vessels.

“What the hell are they doing?” asked Alex.

The doctor ordered the robot to clamp and sever the vas deferens.

“Isn't the vas deferens something to do with sperm production?”

Micah whispered.

“They're sterilising him?” Sarah said, the thought digging a pit in her gut.

They continued to watch as the doctor commanded the robot to cauterise the tubes, watching the live fluoroscopic feed as they sealed completely.

After a few more minutes of abhorrence in silence, watching the doctor and nurse pass medical jargon back and forth, the three subjects decided there was nothing further to learn from watching the rest of the surgery. They returned along the hallway they had come down, made their way back into the living quarters, where the door was waiting for them, ajar. Getting back in to bed, they had more questions than answers.

Tomorrow they would fill the others in, but as each lay their heads down on the facility-issued memory foam pillows, and the lights slowly dimmed back down to leave the room in darkness, they each wondered; am I next?

# *APEX PROJECT AP\_NLI-10*

## Marion Whark Daily Report #13

Phase One is drawing to completion, and the subjects are progressing as expected.

Three of the seven have been through surgery, and as with the NLI-09 and NLI-08 trial, all are responding positively, with no adverse side effects observed thusfar.

Last night's A-Eye feeds reported an incursion into the testing section by three of our subjects, which was unexpected, but not unprepared for. Tonight we shall be installing RFID tags in them all, and guards shall be on 24-hour call, should our guests be tracked going outside of permitted zones in future.

As you will no doubt be familiar with from the previous trials, this is not uncommon as we enter Phase Two and our subjects become more unpredictable in their actions and reasoning. I am however delighted to observe that none of our NLI-10 subjects are displaying the behavioural quirks that previous rounds of testing, and logs from other facilities have noted.

Based on the progress of Phase One, I am confident that this trial will be our shining light amidst the dark days of those previous.

Sitting at her hand-carved mahogany desk in a room deep in the depths of the Cultybraggan facility, Marion Whark signed off and sent in her report to her superiors. She looked around her office, the furnishings from the Shadwell pop-up relocated and arranged with identical feng shui, as they had been at all the recruitment centres. The LED wall behind her was displaying London's skyline as the sun began to rise in the distance. She took a deep breath, trying to contain her rage, and reached to the intercom on her desk, pressing a button.

“Come the fuck in.” she said, sternly.

Her anger was not easily restrained when she didn't have to represent herself as the matriarch of the project.

The two orderlies entered, towering over her in stature, but their faces were carved with expressions of terror at the slight woman sat before them.

“What the *legitimate, actual fuck* happened last night?”

The two gigantic men looked at one another, neither wanting to be the first to speak, yet both wishing to implicate the other.

“This is un-a-fucking-cceptable. Do you understand that? Do you know how it makes me look that my fucking Neanderthals can't look over their fucking shoulders to see a collective of little shits following them into the bowels of a top secret fucking experiment?”

“But...” the first started, and then trailed off, warned to silence by Whark's glare.

“No fucking 'buts', you moron. Dinner tonight their food is drugged, gas in the living quarters, knock them the fuck out and inject RFIDs in all of them. Do. You. Under. Stand?”

They nodded, looking at the floor with shame.

“Good. Now get the fuck out of my sight.” she revolved her chair around, looking out over the LED window at London's skyline, her seething anger washed away slowly by the serene tide of the Thames.

She waited to hear their plodding footsteps leave the room and the door lock behind them before turning back to her desk, taking another deep breath that was expelled with a growl. She pulled out a pile of files and leafed through the subjects until she found Sarah's. Opening it, she scanned the pages until she found the heading she was looking for.

Daughter of APEX employees Scott and Jennifer Kirkland, retired from service in 2015 after A-Eye 1.2 discovered intentions contrary to The Company's best interests. Termination of employment enacted under order of NLI Project director, Marion Whark.

She smiled to herself at a job well done. Having invested so much into the company to raise it to the global stature it had occupied for the last twenty years, she had been rewarded greatly for uncovering the Kirkland's plot to whistle-blow. She grinned as she flicked back to the beginning of the file, a photo of Sarah paper-clipped to the front page, and relished the notion of experimenting on the progeny of the couple who tried to take her company down. Having Sarah as a subject in the trial was a suitable denouement to the whole tale, she thought, given that it was her parent's research that had got the NLI project this far.

The next morning the seven subjects awoke feeling groggy, each of them complaining of pain at the base of their spines. Checking one-another, they discovered that they all had a small circular bruise three to four millimetres in diameter.

"It's between the fourth and fifth lumbar." noted Farah as she looked at the bruise on Alex's spine.

"What does that mean?" asked Rob.

"It means they knocked us out again... it would have been fucking painful if they did a spinal tap when we were awake..." said Micah.

"What would they do to our spines?" asked Leah.

"Could be anything," said Farah "Depends what they were testing for... Cerebrospinal fluid can show signs of infections, or a huge range of disorders. MS, Guillain-Barré, cancers --"

"You think they were testing for cancer?" Leah stammered, breath fast, a quiver on her lip. "Could the trial have given us cancer? Is that what they were doing surgery for?"

Rob put an arm round her and tried to calm her down.

"What if they weren't *taking* anything." Sarah said. The others turned to her and a silence fell on to the room.

"So, rather than remove fluid... they put something else in? On top of the surgery?" asked Alex.

Sarah didn't have an answer, and the room was quiet once again but for the tones echoing through the walls, until interrupted by a chime resounding through the speakers. It was time for another round of tests.

Once again, they were placed in darkness in yet another room beyond another new door on the maze of corridors. Sat adjacent to one-another in deep leather chairs, they were instructed to keep their eyes open and concentrate on trying to recall the grid in their mind's eye. The room tones

roared loudly from the shadows surrounding them, punctuated with asynchronous beeps, taps, sharp squeals of digital noise that sounded like a computer being stabbed in its electric heart. The cacophony and the darkness seemed to last for hours, but as it went on, each of them realised the grid was laid out before their eyes without having to think about it, as if the sonics were calling it out of the ether of memory, summoning it without their control.

More hours passed, and the grid was not only hanging in their vision wherever they turned in the black, but felt like it was steadily populating with some kind non-visual data. Accompanying it was a hormonal release, serotonin relaxing their bodies and minds, letting the information flow. None of it was decipherable, but there was now some kind of depth beneath the shapes they could see in their mind's eye, as if there were something being installed in the grid that they couldn't access.

The tones came to a crescendo, then stopped in an instant. The lights came on, grid fading from view as the room became illuminated. They could all still picture it, but not as evocatively as in darkness. The orderlies took them back to the mess hall for dinner, where they shared their vivid visions.

"It felt kinda like an acid trip, y'know?" said Alex "Like, you're aware what your seeing isn't real, but it feels like it's always there, beneath the surface, the patterns connecting the universe, connecting us all."

"What do you think it was?" Sarah asked Micah.

"Do you want me to be honest, or say it was just another average day in the bunker?" he asked. She wanted the former. "You know that feeling we all had, that pressure of... data or information of some kind?" she nodded, as did the others. "I think they're installing something in our subconscious, through the tones and the drugs."

"Like NLP?" asked Alex, who then had to reluctantly explain Neuro Linguistic Programming to Leah, who was visibly disturbed by a medical-sounding acronym. "It's nothing to be afraid of. Once you're aware of NLP it's less effective, because you're looking for it."

"But this isn't normal NLP, is it?" said Farah. "NLP doesn't have a side salad of surgery, noise and drugs."

A chime through the walls told them it was time to go to the living quarters for sleep, but none of them were tired. Adrenaline and fear of surgery as they slept was keeping their bodies ticking through to the early hours of the

morning. In the darkness, they couldn't shake the image of the grid, as if haunting them in a waking dream. The lights came on to signal morning and none of them had slept a wink, yet didn't feel tired.

At breakfast they tried to make sense of getting through a whole day and night without exhaustion.

"Y'ever try Modafinil?" Alex asked Micah, who had. "Kinda feels like that, huh?"

She proceeded to tell the rest of the group about the drug that the US Army had given to the troops to keep them awake for two to three days straight without loss of mental clarity, none of the jittery feelings and swift tolerance from caffeine or the high and crash of speed or coke.

"So, you think that's what we're here to test? Something to keep people awake?" asked Leah.

"It's probably a side-effect." said Rob. "The rest of these tests haven't exactly lined up with what that drug is for... can't imagine soldiers spending weeks surrounded by flashing lights just to stay awake a little longer."

Their discussion was cut short by a call for them to move through to the testing area. Another day spent in darkness with the noises, another night sleepless with the grid hanging in their vision, clearer than ever.

The week went on, and they went through the same thing every day for six days until they were told it was the weekend.

"How many days have we been here now?" asked Leah during breakfast, her eyes puffy and exhausted.

"I don't even know any more. Don't really fucking care..." said Rob, shrugging her off.

He was irritable. They all were.

"What does it matter?" asked Pete. "They'll let us know when our three months are up."

"But we should have kept track!" said Leah. "How will we know when it's our one month anniversary? We should have a party or something!"

Her words were met with blank stares, the others in disbelief and bemusement.

"Not so much, no." said Alex.

"Why would we want a party?" asked Sarah.



“Everyone likes a party...” said Leah with a huff, slumping in her chair.

Their confounded looks at the young blonde were distracted by the *click-clack* of overpriced heels, as Whark entered.

“How are we all doing this morning?” she asked the group, who turned to her with bag-laden eyes and an inability to feign sincere smiles. “Oh you'll feel right as rain once you get a good night's sleep.”

“About that...” said Pete. “Have you been keeping us awake all week to prove some kind of point, or is it a side effect?”

The others stared at him, each thinking the same thing, but afraid to say so.

“I mean, I understand the need for secrecy with the surgery, the injections into our spines, the weird tones and flashing lights into our faces.”

Sarah considered telling him to shut up, but there was no stopping him, he was on a roll. Plus, he was only saying what they wouldn't

“But you're taking away our sleep! I don't care about the other crap, but sleep is, y'know, **sleep!**”

Whark was, as far as the group could tell, expressing bemusement at her subject's honesty. He turned to the others, his eyes full of shock and confusion.

“I honestly have no idea why I just said that!” he said.

“That would be your limbic cortex firing on all cylinders.” said Whark, to an eyebrow raise and dumb expression from Pete.

“The lizard brain.” said Micah, which brought a nod and a surprised smile from Whark. “Oldest part of the brain, evolutionarily speaking. Has a habit of taking away the filter between thought and speech when you're sleep deprived.

“It's also where the 'fight or flight' impulse comes from.” added Alex.

“Not to mention feeding, fear and fucking.” said Farah, who became visually embarrassed when she heard herself.

“Well, I assure you you'll be getting a good night's sleep after today's session.” said Whark.

“But seriously, are we going to address the surgery?” asked Leah.

“Dear girl, you agreed to it!” said Whark, producing a seven inch tablet from her pocket and flipping through a digital scan of their paperwork, presenting the blonde with her initials on a page.

I am aware that this trial will involve pharmaceutical, psychological, NLP, hypnogogic, and surgical elements, and hereby grant A-Pharma the rights to act as healthcare proxy for the duration of my time in the Cultybraggan Facility.

Leah handed the tablet back, feeling stupid. The table had no further questions for Whark, each finally feeling the exhaustion of the best part of a week without sleep.

“When you're done with your breakfast, do please be so kind as to join the orderlies at the door, we've got a busy morning ahead of us before you can lay your heads down to rest.” She forced a non-smile to them all and strutted out of the room, orderlies opening and closing the door for her without making eye contact.

The group was too tired to be paranoid. They slovenly rose to their feet and followed her out.

Sat once again in the deep leather seats in the dark room, Whark stood in front of them, her voice emanating out of the black.

“Are you all comfortable?” she asked, insincerely. They grumbled in the affirmative.

“Very good. Now I want you to picture the grid.” she said, waiting for them to do so. “Are you all seeing it?” They were.

“Now in the top right there is a small box, do you see it?” They concentrated on the grid, trying to make out its lines and sections in the darkness, one by one seeing the box they were being directed to.

“It is currently...” a light glowed out in the darkness as she brought her wrist up to view her watch, illuminating the angles on her face like she was about to tell them a ghost story. “Ten thirteen a.m.” the light dissipated as she dropped her arm back into the darkness.

The group felt a tingling in the back of their heads, as if some background thought process was running and set off a physical sensation. Metaphysical gears wrestling themselves to life, wheels starting to turn.

“I want you to place that time in the box.” said Whark.

“What do you mean, *'place it in the box'?*” asked Leah, but she didn't have to wait for an answer.

The gears continued to turn, the sensation in the back of their brains increasing. Tingling turning to light thumping, a heartbeat in their heads, the time blinking into the box in the top right of the grid.

“Did I do that?” they all asked, simultaneously. The thumping in their heads subsiding, gears returning to a slumber. The time continued to tick forward to ten fourteen of its own accord.

“That wasn't so difficult, was it?” said Whark, pleased with herself.

“What is this?” asked Farah.

“Some kind of memetic operating system, right?” said Micah.

Whark didn't say a word.

“The tones have been installing it in our subconscious, the flashes building the user interface, the sessions this week optimizing it for our brains, uncompressing the data, propagating the OS with peripheral apps, like the clock. We haven't seen the time or date for weeks and as soon as we have the time presented to us, in a lizard-brain state, it activated the app and...” the time ticked over to ten fifteen “... it's keeping track of the time.”

“Well said, Mr Gorely.” said Whark. In his soliloquy, she had stepped over to the light switch and started bringing up the lights slowly. The group were expecting the grid to fade as the room became illuminated, but it stayed in their vision, the time continuing to tick away.

“Look around.” said Whark. “Look at your fellow subjects.”

They followed her instructions, and as Sarah looked at Alex to her right, dots appeared on Alex's face, tracking her features, a pop-up appearing in her vision giving her name, age, race, occupation, and personal notes she had subconsciously made. Alex was staring right back at her having the same experience. They all were.

“This is insane.” said Micah, turning from Farah to Rob.

Sarah looked back over to Leah, FacialRecog bringing up the same headings they had for Alex, but with information missing. Whark could tell from Sarah's expression that she was missing data

“Missing information can be filled in with supposition, or asking your fellow subjects to fill in the blanks.” she said.

Sarah looked at Leah, and decided to start off light, filling in the *occupation* heading.

“Do you have a job?” she asked.

Leah shook her head. Sarah felt the tingling in the back of her mind as the

operating system updated the information, the *occupation* category filled itself in with 'unemployed'.

“Why are you here?” she asked Leah. “You've never talked about why... you know, how you're a devout Catholic and yet you're in a medical trial... isn't that against the rules?”

Leah didn't respond. Her body was becoming overwhelmed with emotion, and before Sarah could leave her seat to comfort her, tears were already flowing. The others stopped firing questions back and forth to join Leah in her chair, attempting to help stop her tears.

“My father...” she snivelled. “He has a genetic disorder... but the only doctor that will treat him is in America, and... it's so expensive... this was the only way I could get the money...”

The group put arms around her, stroked her hair, told her she had nothing to cry about, and that she was doing a good thing. Rob told her God would understand, that she was willing to sacrifice herself for the good of her father. She took solace in that, and hugged him, whilst everyone else tried to ignore that their profile for Leah was updating with all the information she had just given them.

Whark watched the display of emotions and was unphased, waiting for a suitable amount of time to pass before ordering the group back in their seats to continue the day's work.

The rest of the morning was spent testing out the basic apps built into the OS. Next they were given a series of ten objects to remember. They were shown them for ten seconds and made to write down a list, which most of the group were accurate at recalling. The objects were brought back with a further five, then another ten, then twenty, at which point all of them were forgetting even the first ones.

“In the grid you'll see a menu for peripheral apps. Amongst them is a 'notes' option.” said Whark, waiting a moment for them all to find it before bringing the thirty items out again.

The group looked at the objects and the note-taking app filled with words as they thought about them. She had the objects taken away, and waited a minute before instructing the group to write them down, this time they were all correct.

“Well done.” said Whark. “That's enough for today, let's get you all some well-earned rest.”

She left the room before the group could respond, the Balderlies waiting at the door to march them through to the mess hall for lunch, before taking them back to the living quarters.

As they lay in bed, the lights dimming around them, each of them had yet more questions burning in the back of their minds.

“What do you think the applications of this are?” Rob asked.

“Think about what Hololens and Magic Leap are used for, then take away the need for hardware...” said Micah.

“Games, recreation, medical, therapeutic, military, the list goes on...” said Alex, half-asleep.

None of them liked that 'military' sat amongst her suggestions, but all of them were too exhausted to say so. The conversation died, and they all passed out. The operating system's user interface still hung in their mind's eye, even in sleep. Infiltrating their dreams, analysing data as their conscious minds lay fallow, filling with more content as the room tones hummed and whirred through the night.

## *APEX PROJECT AP\_NLI-10*

Marion Whark Daily Report #21

Subjects continue to act and respond favourably as the functions of the OS are explored and tested.

Closed tests will be carried out for the forthcoming week, with a live fire scheduled for day 28.

Bearing in mind that we are already beyond observed breaking points of the early trials, I am confident that the staggered installation of the NeuroLoader Infrastructure has contributed to the patients' continuing stable mental health. That said, we are monitoring subjects closely in case of outliers, but all parameters appear to be within acceptable levels at time of reporting.

Side effects continue to be minimal to none. After the findings of the 09 trial, addition of peripheral applications are being staggered, as was installation, uploaded as subjects sleep to remain dormant until activated by key phrases in testing sessions. Based on observations thusfar at Cultybraggan and the other facilities, this is proving to be the most stable installation method we have attempted.

Marion Whark sent off the report to her superiors and sat back in her chair, spinning it around to look at the skyline. The sun was low on the horizon, steadily crawling upwards for the day ahead, which she would spend as every day this week, with the subjects. She hated having to babysit them through the steps of the incredibly simple activation and testing of peripheral apps, but didn't trust that her nurses or doctors would be watching the subjects close enough. In the previous trials they had lost resources, subjects and personnel (in order of importance) due to previous mentors not paying enough attention to the subjects, and she wasn't going to let this experiment go the way of the others. This had been her life for the last ten years. Ten years of fighting to convince her superiors that the NLI project had merit, that it was worth the investment and time, the cover-ups and hush money. Ten years of fighting to prove that both she and the project had value.

Whark got up from her chair and looked over the digital London skyline before her. This would once again be her view when she returned in nine weeks with documentation, and perhaps a subject in tow. She wondered who it might be. The girl who's parents she killed, the tranny whose operations and treatment she green-lit, the cousin of the little Muslim boys she wouldn't let leave Tehran, the former born-again she found in a flop house, the apparently reformed hacker she bailed out, the Chinaman she had blacklisted from comedy clubs, or the little Christian girl whose father she'd ordered injected with a toxin that was retarding his DNA. All of them were playthings, toys she had been arranging and manipulating to get them desperate enough to join the trial, each with the right genetic and psychological profiles to reap the best results from the final experiment. She was done with random subjects, prison volunteers, the mentally ill or the homeless. This was her grand finale, and she had cast it perfectly.

Whark waited for her subjects to finish their breakfast and had the orderlies bring them to the black room, where she ran them through the object and facial recognition tests again. She needed to be certain the apps were still functioning before moving on to the new additions.

"Now we're moving on to image recall," she said, enunciating her words clearly, the keyphrase unlocking the app and booting it up in the back of her subjects' brains. She watched intently at their reactions, looking for involuntary movements, twitches or glitches, but there were none.

“This test is similar to note-taking, but rather than fill a mental document with words, I want you to take a snapshot with your minds. They looked at her with confusion. She took out a book, opened to a page at random and turned it to face them all for a few seconds before closing it.

“Read it to me.” she said.

There were shrugs and apologies from her playthings. She was not amused.

“You saw the page?” she asked.

They nodded.

“Then play back the memory.”

All seven of them stared into middle distance and tried to remember it. She could see they were struggling, and reluctantly took them through the process step by step.

“See it in your mind's eye.” she said. “The image recall function will take that image and present it to you within the interface.”

They continued to stare, trying to recreate the image. Whark stifled a scoff and eye roll at how stupid they all looked, staring at the walls ahead of them as they tried to activate the app.

“I think I've got it!” said Micah.

“Me too.” said Alex.

The success of two of their number seemed to make it easier for the others, and soon they all managed to pluck the image from their short term memories.

“Read the page.” said Whark.

“It's too far away!” said Leah.

“Don't be obstinate.” Whark snapped. “The human eye captures images at five hundred and seventy six megapixels, whereas the average camera only has a hundred. Scale up the image, zoom in, whatever you want to call it. You all have twenty-twenty vision, you saw the book, so you can read it.”

She tried to calm herself down, knowing that she was not using the right tone to get good results. She wanted another coffee, and for the first time in five months, a cigarette.

“The champagne. Entre Nous, that champagne of theirs wasn't worth a damn last night.” read Sarah, from the image hovering in front of her eyes.

“I've never cared for champagne anyway. Let me tell you, Kittredge, it's very important to know about wines.” continued Rob.



“For instance when you'll take a client out to dinner and will want to be sure of the proper thing to order.” said Alex

“Now I'll tell you a professional secret.” said Farah.

“Take quail, for instance. Now most people would order Burgundy with it.” said Micah

“What do you do? You call for Clos Bougeot 1904, see?” said Pete

“What are you reading?” asked Leah. “I can't get it to work!”

She was visibly upset again. Rob got up and went over to comfort her.

“It's The fucking Fountainhead.” said Rob, reading the title from the top of his scaled view of the recalled book.

“Fuck The Fountainhead.” said Alex. “Objectivist bullshit.”

“I can't see it!” said Leah. “Why can't I see it?”

“Calm down.” Rob told her. “Just breath and relax. Try and think about Miss Whark showing us the book. It was only for a second, but think about it, and hold that image in your mind, this thing they installed will do the rest.”

“It's not working!” she said, her eyes ruddy.

“Take a deep breath, don't overthink it, just let it happen.”

“It's me, isn't it!” she cried. “It's because... It's because I'm not like you, I'm not a drug addict or a ladyboy, I'm not special, I'm not meant to be here!”

He held her whilst the others watched on, trying not to take offence at her comments.

Whark also watched the crying girl and pursed her lips. She wasn't expecting this round of subjects to fail at accessing the most basic of apps, let alone having unwarranted emotional outbursts. She would have to report this. It would be a black mark on an otherwise perfect trial, even if it was with the neurotypical baseline subject that was expected to fail. Then again, other than the A-Eyes, she was the only official in the room. The Eyes' recordings could be amended, and perhaps something could happen to the girl that might take precedence over an outburst in a simple test. She mulled on this as she watched the scene play out, building a scenario in which she could make her problem go away.

“That's all for today.” she said. “Go get lunch, rest up, tomorrow we've got a big day.”

Whark retired to her office to think her plan through. She pulled up the NeuralNet feeds on her terminal and watched Leah's freak-out before deleting the footage and amending the timestamps of the session. She had already reported that the live fire test would take place in eight days, and bringing it forward might draw suspicion, but she could rearrange the forthcoming weeks worth of training, manipulate the regime to have time to put Leah on a path that would seal her fate. Keep her from besmirching the trial's spotless run thusfar.

After the sun set on London, Whark retired to her bedroom, flock wallpaper on the walls, four-poster bed at the centre, and a roaring fire in a nook she had installed, with ventilation constructed especially for her proclivity to sleep by real flames rather than in a climate-controlled room. She lay on her Egyptian cotton bedspread and smiled to herself, only a few days of agonizing sessions to get through until this burden was shed and they could launch into phase three with all cylinders firing.

The next day the lights slowly faded up in the living quarters and Whark watched as the subjects rose from their beds, showered and ate breakfast. She instructed the nurse to tell them that they would be having individual sessions all day, and had the orderlies take them through to the rec room until it was time for them to head to the testing room.

The nurse took Leah through for the first session of the day. The diminutive blonde followed her in to the room, looking pale and nervous. Whark was waiting for them, welcomed her in with a forced smile and had Leah sit in a chair in darkness, illuminated only by monitors lining the walls. The nurse placed electrodes on her head, over her heart, along her arms and legs. Whark excused the nurse for the first session, insisting on being hands-on for the test. She instructed Leah to sit back and relax whilst she faced the screens and surreptitiously inserted earplugs. When they were in place, she looked down to her watch, touching the screen to activate subtle tones in the the room that made Leah's eyelids grow heavy. In under a minute, she had passed out. Whark swept through the options on her watch screen and switched the selection of tones, a digital groan roaring to life. After the noise hit a crescendo, she set off a third series of digital screams. In her slumber, Leah started to breath heavily as a new program was installed through the sonics.

Two hours later, Whark was waking Leah, sending her back with the orderlies. She excused herself and allowed the nurse to carry on the tests for the rest of the day. Returning to her office, Whark monitored the A-Eye feeds, as Leah was taken back to the rec room and proceeded to isolate herself with her bible in the corner, shrugging off any attempts by the others to converse. The programming was working just as she expected. Whark flipped the feed back to the testing room to watch Sarah's session, intrigued at how her favourite subject was going to react to the trial ahead.

The nurse sat Sarah down in the chair, attaching electrodes whilst telling her to relax.

"Those aren't the same electrodes as last time, are they?" asked Sarah, her image recall comparing the electrodes used in previous tests (oval and blue) to the ones currently being attached (white and round).

"No they're not." said the nurse, surprised.

"What do they do that's different?" said Sarah.

"These connect your vitals and experiences to the NeuralNet, so we have full records of the test." said the nurse.

"What is the test?" asked Sarah.

"Oh it's very easy, you're just going to think about your memories, from this very conversation back through to your earliest childhood experience. You're going to hold each one for a few moments and associate some keywords with it, then go to the next one."

"Like tagging a YouTube video?" said Sarah.

"Exactly. It's training your memory to do it by itself. So next time you see, for example, a cat, you can add it to the memory bank of cats or recall all the other cats you've seen in your life to compare it to."

"Right..." said Sarah, unsure how useful it would be to be able to have instant recall of cats, and put the example down to the nurse oversharing how *she* would use image recall.

The nurse pressed a button on her watch and a low hum of tones played through the walls.

"We're all set here!" said the nurse. "Why don't you think about the memory of this conversation and attach some tags."

Sarah thought about the conversation as instructed. Playing it back was easier than it had been recalling the image of the book the previous day. In

addition to having the memory playing out in her mind's eye, she saw a box waiting to be filled with keywords. Thinking for a moment, in an instant the box was filled with the words *'pointless conversation, bad analogy, nurse, experiment, medical trial, cat lady'*.

The nurse huffed. Sarah looked back from middle-distance to see her staring at the monitor, the tags coming up on the screen.

“I was only trying to be helpful...” said the nurse.

Sarah apologised and deleted the insulting tags. The nurse said it was fine and sat with her as she recalled sitting in the rec room, having breakfast, waking up, going to sleep, Leah's freakout, the test the previous day, giving each of them mundane tags. She looked over to the nurse, who was visibly bored.

“I think I've got the hang of this.” said Sarah. “You're welcome to go get a coffee or something.”

“If you don't mind, love.” said the nurse. “That would do me the world of good.”

After she left, Sarah continued to go through the memories, glad not to be watched over. She knew that as she got farther back in time, she'd undoubtedly pass memories of her intentions in the facility, and although she wouldn't tag them, didn't trust that the NeuralNet wasn't spying on her mind somehow.

An hour passed and she had managed to go back nine years, the nurse only checked in on her once to make sure the electrodes hadn't fallen off. Sarah was worried what would happen when she got to the memories of her parents. If the NeuralNet was only monitoring her vitals then it wasn't a problem, but if it was doing more, if it were somehow connecting to the OS installed in her subconscious, then maybe it would be able to discern their faces like her FaceRecog was able to recognise the other members of the group.

Without thinking, she found herself remembering the day she was told about her parent's accident. Coming home early in the morning from a party, ecstasy and alcohol still milling in her blood. The drugs glazed the emotion with a neon tint, distracted from the tears unconsciously rolling down her face as the policeman told her she'd have to identify them. Her mind was all over the place, body telling her to touch his hat and feel the textures of his uniform whilst her consciousness was trying to stay afloat

between devastation of the news and elation of the MDMA. She went in his car, her hands shaking uncontrollably, wishing it were all a dream, floating on a storm cloud of serotonin peaks and troughs. They pulled the sheet back and she saw their faces. Their lifeless, pale faces.

The NeuralNet monitor beeped.

Pulled out of the memory and back in the room, Sarah looked over to the monitor, a red alert blinking. She got up, careful not to disturb any of the electrodes and tried to activate the console. It wasn't coded for her biometric profile, and wouldn't respond to her touch.

Whark watched intently at the monitor as Sarah was visibly panicking. She scanned through the logs of the facility's NeuralNet and saw the alert. FaceRecog had picked up the profiles of two former APEX employees in her mind's eye. The alert asked if she wanted to forward the memo off to the external A-Eye system and she hovered over the options. Whark watched as Sarah continued to fret, knowing that she would never report it to the wider system. That would tell the superiors at APEX that she was finishing up a very personal vendetta with company resources. She wanted to see what Sarah would do next.

Sarah gave up trying to battle with the console she couldn't operate, and sat back in the chair, making sure the electrodes were all in place. They were monitoring her. Connecting to her, to the software installed in her brain. She tried to think about how that could possibly work, wished she had read more, or asked Micah about NeuralNets, it was the type of thing he'd probably know all about. She went in to her memories, using the tags to pull out all the times she read or heard about NeuralNets. Every memory in which they had ever been mentioned, articles she had half-read, conversations she had tried to ignore, documentaries that were left on in the background. They were all displayed in front of her, each titled like albums on iTunes. She span them all through as quick as they would play, listening and looking out for important information.

*“Artificial Neural Networks are inspired by biological neural networks, built using neuromorphic engineering to –“* she span past the physical process of how they were put together, it wasn't important. The more she searched, the more it seemed like a fruitless endeavour, none of

the information seemed relevant. She had never talked or read enough about them. But it was connected to her right now, it was monitoring her very thoughts, seeing what she saw in her mind's eye. If it could see what *she* saw, Sarah started to wonder if maybe she could see what *it* saw. There was a tingling in the back of her head, the familiar feeling of the operating system's gears whirring, an app unlocking and activating. She closed her eyes as she tried to comprehend the data that was appearing in her interface. It was all too much, overwhelming her senses, it wasn't meant to be accidentally triggered, she wasn't experienced enough with the operating system to deal with the uncontrolled burst of data exploding through her cortex. She opened her eyes, and realised they weren't just *her* eyes. The lights went out.

When they came back on, Sarah was seeing from her own perspective, but was also watching herself from the corner of the room. She turned and looked up at her own point of view, from the LED of the A-Eye, staring at herself whilst she stared at herself. One of a thousand eyes she could feel connected out across the facility.

Whark watched as Sarah looked up at the camera, the electrodes barely gripping to her skin. She didn't blink. Her eyes locked on Sarah as she turned to the console. Whark briefly glanced over to the screen with the alert, then back to the camera feed.

Sarah looked at the alert, thinking about the heartbeat-in-her-head, willing it into being. A pressure was building in the back of her mind, like someone was blowing into a washing-up glove in her head, a sense of inflation with fingers crawling on the inside of her skull, making their way along the channels in her neural tissue, she could see every feed of every camera all at once, a thousand eyes each on a different room. It was disorienting, but she couldn't let the connection go. She went through all the feeds, pulled back to the room she was in, watched herself standing in front of the console, and tried to get the biometric profile to be lifted. It wasn't working, it wasn't something she knew how to do. But the console was on the NeuralNet, she could get *in* to the system without having to touch it. She didn't know how she was going to do so, but it was as if her thoughts were ten steps ahead of her. Mind's eye flooded with electric light,

subconscious speeding through pathways, turning through digital corridors that she knew had to just be graphic representations her mind was coming up with to allow her to comprehend what she was doing. Twisting and turning through the maze of light, she came to a door, and somehow knew that it operated and brought up the alert. As she reached for it, with a hand that only existed in her imagination, she read the alert from within the system.

*FaceRecog has scanned profiles of former APEX employees in subject's memory.  
Do you wish to forward alert  
to the external A-Eye Net?*

She cancelled the notification, and delved back in to the NeuralNet. If she could get access to the console, maybe this was her way to get all the intel she so desperately wanted without even having to step foot in a physical room.

Her thoughts were cut off. She couldn't keep them out any longer, the eyes in every corridor in the facility, every room. it was overwhelming. She ripped the electrodes from her head, falling to the floor in a daze. Head pounding. Eyes aching. As if she had been staring at something too bright, too close, for too long.

Whark watched as the nurse eventually returned and helped Sarah back up into the chair, the subject giving her an excuse of '*wanting to stretch her legs and slipped*'. Whark scoffed at the nurse's gullibility, but didn't care about employing an idiot. Her favourite from this experiment's toy box had just become top of the class.

“Red walls.” said the nurse.

The subjects stared into middle-distance as they brought up all the images of red walls from the depths of their memories. Rooms, paintings, music videos, buildings, everything relevant to the key phrase.

“Play the memory, describe it.” she said, as she had done with each key phrase for the last hour of testing the memory tagging process.

Alex recalled a Rothko. Sarah discovered a long lost memory of a cafe her parents took her to when she was ten. Micah picked the red backdrop of Nirvana's Heart Shaped Box. Rob recalled the red curtain around Twin Peaks' Black Lodge. Farah pulled the memory of a photo from an interior design magazine she flipped through once at a dentist's office. Pete found the memory of a strip club he was once forced to go to by a straight friend. But Leah had nothing.

“It's still not working!” she said, pursing her lips, eyes glazed with tears waiting to fall.

“Take a deep breath.” said the nurse. “Think about the words again, 'Red. Walls.' Let your unconscious mind do all the work, deep breaths all the way through, until the images start to form.”

She stared hard at the black wall ahead of her, leaning forward, squinting, trying to concentrate, and the nurse could see she was having trouble.

“Stop trying so hard, dear. This works without you having to think about it. Sit back and relax.”

Leah did so, breathing deep and holding each inhalation for a few seconds before exhaling.

“Red. Walls.” the nurse said again.

Leah closed her eyes and the images began to propagate slowly. She opened them and the images faded. Closing her eyes, she tried again, thinking over and over *'red walls, red walls, red walls'*. Finally, an image came. A



painting of Dante's Inferno her father had once shown her. She opened her eyes and couldn't hold back the tears any longer. The nurse told them they'd take a break for fifteen minutes, whilst the others comforted her.

"Don't worry about it. And don't be so hard on y'self." said Alex, with a forced smile trying to reassure the distraught blonde.

"I can't do this! It's not coming easy like it is for the rest of you!" she said.

"It's not your fault." said Micah "Nobody is judging you. I reckon it's because you haven't, uh, *experimented* with psychedelics."

"So it's not working because I'm not 'cool' enough to do drugs?" she spat back at him.

"No, it's not that. Maybe this is a blind trial, do you know what that means?" she didn't, so Micah explained. "A blind trial is where the subjects, we, don't have all the information about the trial and take part in it. If it's double-blind, the people watching us, like the doctors and nurses, don't know which of us have psychedelically altered brains. And if it's triple-blind, then the people who look at the results don't know either."

"What are you saying?" she said, her frustration withdrawn, replaced by confusion.

"Maybe they needed a 'normal' brain to compare with the rest of us. So, if this experiment requires screwed up brains, we're going to excel at it, and you're the test subject that's going to show how it all effects a neurotypical person. Does that make sense?"

It didn't, but she took a modicum of solace in the idea of being normal in comparison to the rest of the group.

"Are you feeling better?" asked the nurse.

Leah was, and the test resumed, another two hours of words and phrases fired at them.

"Well done everyone!" the nurse said enthusiastically, as the third hour drew to a close. "Now that your memory tagging is working to full effect, your brain should subconsciously be tagging all your new memories for instant recall. So, if I say '*session where I asked you to recall memories*' --"

They all found themselves bringing up and playing back the memory of the test from the very beginning, then realised they could spin it backwards and forwards like a VHS tape. The audio played like a whisper inside their

heads, the visuals hanging in their mind's eye, but vivid and almost three-dimensional.

“Pause it.” said the nurse. “Look around.”

They all did so. The paused memory hung in the air in front of them, and as they turned their heads, discovered they could look in directions they hadn't been looking when the memory took place. What was once periphery was now an almost holographic recreation of the room.

“We call it *projection*.” said the nurse. “And we'll be practising it more as the day goes on. But now it's time for lunch!” She held the door open for them, where the orderlies were waiting to take them back to the mess hall.

When they returned to the room an hour later, the group were full of excitement for the impending test. Micah and Alex had monopolised talk during their break, bouncing back and forth about comparisons to Star Trek's holodeck and Star Wars holograms, Minority Report interfaces and Iron Man's heads-up display. They were living their science fiction dreams. Sarah's attention had wandered off during the conversation, trying to work out why she and the others no longer seemed to have fear or anxiety about the surgery, as if it wasn't a massive, terrifying discovery. And yet she felt nothing. Her task at hand was still in the back of her mind, but even the emotion that was driving her forward seemed like it wasn't as prescient. As if being successful in the experiment itself was now more of a priority.

The nurse sat them back down in their deep leather chairs and told them to get comfortable before they started the afternoon's session.

“Remember when you first got here.” she instructed.

The group stared ahead and conjured the images from memory. Sarah looked down and saw a holographic hand emanating from her body, holding a phone. The imagined screen was browsing the Wikipedia article about the Cultybraggan Base she was reading when she arrived.

“Breathe deep through your nose, explore the scents around you.” said the nurse, standing beyond their projections.

Sarah could smell the leather interior, and beyond that, the aftershave of the driver. It wasn't an aroma she could remember noticing when she was actually in the car. This frozen moment in time was more vivid than when it was happening. She had more control of her senses, could isolate the scents and sights better than when they originally occurred.

“Play it forwards, to when you first met Miss Whark.”

Sarah spun the memory forward, approaching the hillside with the other Bentleys, the doors unlocking, each of them emerging from the cars looking at their surroundings, and then Whark coming out of the halogen-lit tunnel carved into the hill. She paused the memory.

“I want you to stand up and explore the memory.” the nurse instructed. The subjects all did so, walking around the ground in front of them, the smell of the countryside lingering in the air, their feet touching the ground and something in their nervous systems creating feedback in the soles of their feet that felt like they were walking on the holographic grass that lay before them.

“*May I have your attention?*” said holo-Whark as she emerged from the tunnel, Sarah walking around her, the memory playing out from perspectives she couldn't possibly have seen, as if her brain was filling in the missing information with data it had been gathering in the background.

She walked right up to Whark, eye-to-eye, stared at the woman, inhaling her perfume deeply and studying her face. The upward lilt of her lips that faked a smile, the eyes that weren't cooperating with the false emotion. Sarah wondered if the woman ever displayed any real feelings, and found herself playing back other memories of Whark, her non-smiles, her attempts at displaying normal human feelings. The only time she had actually seen the woman reveal anything close to an honest reaction was when she instructed them in the process for initiating the OS. In that moment she was proud, of herself it seemed, rather than of them. Sarah wound forward to the only other genuine emotion she had ever witnessed Whark present, when she watched Leah's breakdown later in the same session. There was disdain on her face, anger or hate, an undercurrent of scheming in her eyes. Sarah didn't know where the analysis was coming from, but she watched Whark's expressions, and could detect her micro-expressions. Somehow, she knew that the woman who presented herself as their inductor and quasi den-mother over this period of lucrative incarceration was, in that moment, hatching a plan to deal with Leah. Sarah didn't know what to do with the information, especially given that it was based entirely on supposition and a whisper of neural activity she couldn't quite describe. What she did know was that the experiment was continuing to give her the tools to bring it down from the inside. She could now

remember every door she had been through, every hallway, every camera. The map was so clear, a three-dimensional projection of the facility, and with every passing day of the remaining two months she'd fill in the remaining blanks until it was time to strike. Until then, she'd be the best damn test subject she could be.

At the end of the week the group was told that they were going on a field trip. They were given a new set of clothes, thick grey trousers and shirts, a coat and hiking boots. For the first time in a month, they walked back along the corridor leading to the world outside, the daylight from the door ahead was blinding, its fingers of light stretching down the hallway towards them. Micah likened it to a DMT experience he once had, crossing over to the afterlife, and some of the others agreed. It took them a little while to adjust to the natural light, and as they did, were guided to the door of a matte black van with spacious leather interior. The Balderlies and nurse took up occupancy in the spare seats in the back, pulling the doors shut behind them as the driver started their journey.

Through tinted windows they looked out over the countryside, greens and blues of hills and sky on the horizon felt like a revelation. None of them had realised how much they missed the outside world, having seen nothing but concrete walls and metal girders for the last four weeks. After ninety minutes of driving, the van came to a stop at the banks of a lake, and they were instructed to depart.

“When you said we were going on a 'field trip', I didn't think it would be to a *literal* field!” said Pete to smiles from the others.

They were herded together by the Balderlies.

“How's it feel being back outdoors?” asked the nurse, to positive responses. “The tests today are a little different, as I'm sure you've gathered. I hope you were all paying attention to the route we took, because you'll be walking back!”

She was too enthusiastic for the group. In the UI they were pulling up the journey time, which they had logged at ninety minutes, and each of them had subconsciously fired up peripheral apps to work out the average speed and distance. Even at twenty-five miles an hour on the country roads, they were looking at at least thirty miles. Somehow they knew that average

walking speed was around three miles an hour, so she was essentially telling them they would spend the next ten hours walking.

“Ten hours by road, but where you're going, you won't need roads!” she said with a smile at Micah, having heard him talk of science fiction movies over the last four weeks. He smiled politely at the reference, but wasn't amused. “You'll be walking cross-country, no roads, no signs, the orderlies will join you to make sure you obey the rules.” She started stepping away from them, back towards the car. “I look forward to seeing you back at the facility later this afternoon!” she closed the door behind her and the car took off down the road.

“How are we meant to do this?” asked Rob.

“There's got to be something in here...” said Farah, flicking through the apps in her mind's eye, her hand unconsciously waving in front of her face as she wiped them out of her field of view.

The others watched her with fascination.

“You know you don't need to move your hand, right?” asked Pete.

“It makes more sense to me.” she said. “And it's like, I get a tingle in my finger when I make contact with them, like they're really there.”

“Haptic feedback.” said Micah. “Like the vibrations on tablet screens to make it feel like you're touching a physical keyboard.”

“Yeah, it's like that, but *inside* my fingers.”

“I think I've got something.” said Sarah, grabbing their attention. “I think I know which way is north...”

“How did you work that out?” asked Micah.

“I don't know, I just looked around, maybe looked up, and when I looked back down I had this compass bar hanging in the top of my vision.” she twirled around. “It's rotating as I rotate.”

“How does that help us?” asked Leah. “We have no idea where we're going!”

Rob could see that she was starting to get upset and put an arm round her.

“It's going to be ok.” he whispered.

“I've got it too!” said Alex, tilting her head up and down, looking around with the direction projected over her mind's eye.

“Shit, it works in memories!” said Micah, staring off into space as he wound memories back, the compass sticking with him throughout. “We have to head north-east.” he said, turning in the right direction.

“But the car went off the opposite way.” said Pete.

“Yeah, but that's because they have to stick to roads.” said Micah. “If we go straight through the countryside, I think that's half the distance, maybe less.”

“What are we waiting for?” asked Alex, starting to hike across the hill. The others followed her up the incline as they started their long, arduous journey back to the facility.

As the hike progressed, Sarah wished she had known what the day would have entailed. If she had, perhaps she could have used her projected mind-map of the facility, stolen the data she needed to implicate the company and found a point to sneak away from the Balderlies watchful eye. Part of her was regretting not being smart enough to do so, but a greater part was nagging her to see the experiment through. It had given her so many gifts, skills that she never imagined having, and perhaps there were more secrets to unlock. Sarah hoped *that* was the reason she was reluctant to leave early, because the only alternative she could conjure was that Whark had instigated some kind of protocol, in the tones or drugs, to keep them placid and content in the facility.

Two and a half hours later, they were coming to another lake and started to edge around it.

“I know this lake.” said Alex.

“We've been here before.” Farah agreed. “It's on the map, do you guys see a map.” They all did, it was tracking their path, with the landforms laid out, the lake ahead of them named Loch Lubnaig.

“How do we know the name of it?” asked Pete.

Micah ran his memories back and found that four hours earlier, when en route in the car, they passed signs to the Loch.

“It's filling in the gaps.” said Micah. “Grabbing all the superfluous information our brains pick up and discard normally. The OS is taking those remnants of memory, those tiny details, like a sign that was completely ignored but seen nonetheless, and making use of it!”

“It's about twenty miles back to the camp.” said Alex, spinning through memories of her own. “By road that is, based on the odometer in the car.”

“But if we cross over that hill...” said Farah, pointing past the Loch. “We're looking at maybe only ten miles.”

“How do you know that?” asked Rob.

“I vaguely looked over a GoogleMap before going to Glasgow a few years ago... I mean, we're forty or so miles up from Glasgow, but I must have seen this area.”

They made it round the Loch and continued their trek onwards, up the hill as suggested. Next they made their way through a deep wood, and crossed country lanes, precariously made their way across a stream, past a farmhouse, and finally the sideways cylinders of the camp's above-ground buildings were visible. As they walked to the gates of the camp, guards wrenched them open, saying nothing as the subjects entered, nodding at the orderlies as they passed by. The nurse came out of the tunnel to the facility as they walked up to the car.

“Well done everyone, you're back in record time! How are you all feeling?”

The group was exhausted, but the nurse assured them they'd be well rewarded. She instructed them to shower and change, “And be sure to drink lots of water!” When they were ready, the evening's activities would begin.

They did as instructed, finding it curious that the nurse referred to the second half of their day as 'activities' rather than 'tests', but nobody dwelled on it. They were all too glad to have a hot shower, washing off the sweat and mud, and having a chance to rehydrate after seven hours of walking. Whark entered the mess hall and congratulated them on their record. She told them that dinner wouldn't be served there. They were going out to celebrate their success.

A seventy minute drive later, they were in the heart of Glasgow. The car left them by Royal Exchange Square and they walked to an exclusive looking restaurant. Whark gave her name to the concierge and he ushered them all to a private area where they were presented with menus and plied with wine.

“Are you sure we should be drinking?” asked Leah. “They say you shouldn't mix medication and alcohol.”

“Oh hush.” said Whark, knocking back a glass of red before continuing. “A drink is exactly what you need.”

Leah took the glass in front of her and started drinking deeply.

They ordered, chatter and laughs whipping back and forth across the table between the subjects. Pete finally had the opportunity and excuse to

present a tight five of stand-up, that ran closer to a loose fifteen. As the food began to arrive, anecdotes were being traded, speculation flowing at what they could do if they pooled their payments together, spend the collective eighty-four thousand pounds on racehorses or boats, a helicopter or very small island. Whark observed their discussions, never taking part or showing any emotion other than the occasional cold smile when she felt eyes fall on her. Sarah watched her intently when she didn't think Whark was looking, studying her. There was no reason for her to be taking them out, not unless it was part of another test, or part of her plan to deal with Leah. She felt a shiver down her spine, and wondered if she could or should alert the others, or at the very least tell Leah of her fears. Something was stopping her from acting, the same unknown that was stopping her from enacting her plan and running away.

After dinner, Whark ushered them back to the car and drove the drunken group round to the bottom of Buchanan Street, where they were told to get out. They looked at the River Clyde in view behind the car and Whark alerted their attention to the pedestrianised area ahead, packed full of shoppers, drinkers and restaurant patrons.

“Are you ready for today's final test?” she asked.

They weren't expecting another test, but nodded in acknowledgement.

“How drunk would you say you are?” she asked. They were all fairly drunk, and didn't have a unit of measurement to put it into words.

“Well, you're going to run through the crowd as fast as you can, all the way to the top of the street, then all the way back down here. If you hit someone, you lose points. Do you understand?”

“When did we start using a points system?” asked Pete, to chuckles from his peers.

“That's not possible.” said Leah. You can't run straight into a big group of people and not hit anyone!”

“Within the mapping and targeting tools you used to find your way back to the facility, you'll find a function we call '*hypersight*', and your bodies can counteract the effects of alcohol if you tell them to. Now run!” she shouted, returning to the confines of the car and slamming the door shut.

The group looked at one another momentarily before following her instructions. At first their footsteps were heavy and waddling, accompanied



by wavering shoulders and spinning heads that made them feel like they were on a tilt-a-whirl, but they ran and ran, because that was the task they were set. Clumsily, darting around one another and the hundreds of people ahead of them, trying to neither hit anyone nor fall over in the process of avoiding the pedestrians. One by one, they found the task easier. Farah wiped through apps and options with her hands as she ran, looking to the others as though she was operating invisible marionettes as she sped through the crowd. Sarah found the option for hypersight and activated it. Her vision shifted. Rather than having the singular focus of binocular vision, it was as if her eyes were relinquishing all control of object-specific focus. No longer able to make out individual people, seeing everything all at once. Time appeared to fluctuate, standing still and rushing forwards all at once. She could anticipate the movement of every foot on the street, every turn and stop those around her made, all of them as clear as if each were happening right in front of her. Watching everything and nothing all at once. She couldn't pick her fellow subjects out from the sea of bodies by their faces, but could keep track of them and their positions because because they were the only other people running at full pelt through the crowd. They reached the top of the street, smiling at one another with eyes that acknowledged a smile was perceived, but couldn't discern the details of the face it belonged to, then turned around and ran straight back down the street.

From the car, Whark watched the runners on a series of video feeds displayed on the smartglass of the car window. She smiled to herself as the subjects pursued one another through the mass of confused people, the feeds switching cameras as the group ran by, accompanied by a constant feed from an A-Eye drone following them from high above. They ducked and weaved, jumped and darted through strangers, enthused by the experience to try and get through tighter gaps, sliding under held hands, jumping over dogs on leashes and babies in strollers. They were all succeeding, all faster and better than the previous generation of NLI subjects. All but the little blonde girl who was holding up the rear, slowing down, clutching her head, then her heart, then her head again, looking up at the sky, her face contorted, agony in her bawling eyes. Whark watched, stony faced, zoomed the camera in to see the girl's pain as a small crowd

formed around her. A smile curled up her face, red lipstick against olive skin, small wrinkles forming by her eyes. A genuine smile.

The group came down the street, giggling with schoolgirlish glee as they stopped by the car, trying to catch their breath between laughs, still unable to see one another properly in hypersight. They brought their faces up close to each other, trying to work out who they were from complexion and features.

After the laughter subsidised, Whark opened the door and congratulated them as they returned their vision to singular focus, instructing them to get back in to the car, as a series of tones played on the speakers inside.

“Charles, back to the facility.” she said, adjusting her earplugs and closing the door behind her subjects. Rob looked around, certain that someone was missing, but the thought drifted out of his mind as the tones continued.

The crowd around Leah parted as a pair of giant bald paramedics came through, pushing a gurney. The two massive men lifted the little blonde girl on to the stretcher. She was no longer screaming. No longer crying. No longer breathing. They wheeled her off the street and into the back of a van. The A-Eyes watched the van drive off, playing the footage back and forth of the girl's run, collapse, and agony, chattering amongst themselves through their NeuralNets before sending the data through to a human operator with a selection of options for a course of action to follow.

The tones reverberated through the night, and continued to stalk the group the next day. From the living quarters to the mess hall, it was the soundtrack to their hangovers, as they sipped coffee in groggy silence at breakfast. The sonics followed them through the hallways to the testing room, where the nurse was waiting to take them through the first task of the day.

“How are you all feeling this morning?” she said, her ability to hear their mumbled responses hindered by earplugs blocking out the tones. She could judge by their faces that they weren't feeling their best.

“Well, how about we get rid of that pesky veisalgia?” she said, to confused expressions. “Your hangovers, let's get those switched off.”

Despite the murmurs from the group being almost inaudible, she could tell confusion was bubbling away. The nurse explained that buried within the menus were the options to turn various cognitive and biological functions on and off. After twenty minutes of struggling to think through the alcohol sludge dulling their concentration, the group all managed to track down the sub-menu. She then instructed them to go through the list of compounds, and reduce the build-up of acetaldehyde, spelling it out for them to make their search easier. Next they decreased NADH levels and increased production of NAD<sup>+</sup>, as advised. Following that, was a run through the list of immune system components, where they were to lower the level of cytokines temporarily to relieve the headache, exhaustion and nauseous symptoms. After they had all caught up, she took them through the process of redirecting and increasing blood sugar, magnesium, salts and potassium, and decreasing production of hydrochloric acid. Within half an hour of tinkering they were all feeling normal again, and she congratulated them on their success.

Next, they were taken through to another room where three pairs of chairs were laid out opposite one another, a table in-between, with sterile packages laid out. The nurse sat the six subjects down and told them they were to take a needle from one of the sterile packets and prick the finger of their partner, then swap over. They followed her orders, wincing on either side of the table, at both skin being breached, and having to hurt a friend. A single bead of blood formed at the tiny wounds, to which each of the victims held a sterile wipe until the blood stopped.

“We’re going to do that again,” said the nurse. “But this time, without the pain.”

Again, her instruction was met with confounded expressions, but once more, she walked them through the menus and showed them where the controls for their pain receptors were. They went through the needle test again, this time the pain receptors in their fingers had been deactivated, central nervous systems reconfigured “to stop the sensation,” as the nurse put it “From extremities integrating with the neuroaxis, passing through the spinal column to the brain.”

After successfully completing the needle test, it was time for lunch back in the mess hall, where they spent most of the hour slapping and kicking one another playfully, deactivating and reactivating the pain, practising what they had learnt that morning. Whilst the others played with pain functions, Micah sat staring into middle-distance, delving into the sub-menus and exploring more of the potential alterations he could make to himself. He found the functions for taste within minutes of experimentation. Soon the risotto he had been served was tasting like steak, then strawberries, eggs then cheese. He shared his findings with the others, and before the lunch break was up, they were all playing around with tastes and smells.

When they returned to the testing room, they shared their discoveries with the nurse, who congratulated them once again, and pressed a button to lower a projector from the ceiling. She proceeded to display horrendous images on the wall, of drowning refugees, starving Africans, dead children riddled with bullet holes, interspersed with photos of animal cruelty and war-torn villages and towns. They were introduced to a list of behavioural traits and went about learning how to deactivate empathy, fear, anger, abhorrence and all the other feelings that they associated with the grotesque

imagery of suffering presented to them. When the photos were played through again, they felt nothing, but as soon as the test was over, each quickly turned all the empathetic responses back on. None of them liked feeling completely devoid of emotion.

As the afternoon progressed, the nurse had each subject go to a whiteboard and write down their vices, instructing them to be completely honest. Pete had them in fits of giggles when he took the lead with 'masturbation'. Rob admitted to having a mild addiction to cigarettes despite having not smoked for a month, as did Farah. Alex thought she drank and got high too much, and Micah also wrote down weed. Sarah struggled to come up with a vice, but eventually decided that based on her inability to find or attempt a real job, that she was lazy. Reading the board, the nurse took them back into the menus and taught them how to deal with their impulses. Micah was ahead of the class, and had moved on to the language options, editing the code to pervert his speech patterns so he could only say words backwards.

“How did you do that?” asked Sarah.

“S'ti yllaer ysae” Micah replied, to giggles. “fi uoy og otni eht unem, rednu 'hceeps', taht enituorbus nac eb nettirwer.”

“You know I literally have no idea what you're saying, right?” said Sarah.

“Haey! eno ces...” he looked away from her as he went through the menus, digging deep into the infrastructure of the operating system to find a way of communicating what he was trying to explain.

“Ym doG!” he said.

“What?” Sarah asked.

“Siht si gnizama!”

“Seriously, what?” she said.

Micah looked back over to Sarah, having activated the protocol he found buried in the code.

*'Check this shit out.'* he said to Sarah.

The words didn't come from his mouth. She could hear them in her head, as if they were thoughts of her own, but in his voice.

“What the hell?” she said out loud, staring at his goofy expression.

*'Pretty cool, huh?'* he replied, as a whisper in the back of her mind.

“What is this?” she asked.

*'It's a hidden protocol in the operating system'* Micah said, his thoughts still running through Sarah's brain. *'Network infrastructure, buried crazy-deep. I'll run you through it.'*

Micah took her through how he got to the networking options and she activated the protocol.

*'How is this possible?'* she asked, her thoughts now in his head.

*'No idea, maybe it's something people are capable of with the right psychological or hypnotic manipulation?'* he replied. *'Or maybe it's the drugs, or the room tones, or the surgery. Could be anything.'*

*'It just doesn't seem real.'* she said.

*'Tell me about it.'*

“Are you guys having a moment?” Pete asked. “Am I interrupting? You've been staring at each other in silence for the last few minutes...”  
Micah passed the instructions on to Pete, then shared them with the rest of the group. Soon they were all talking, yet not a single word was spoken out loud.

Whark watched on her monitor at the subjects progress and smiled to herself. Her problem had been removed, and now the group was excelling beyond her wildest expectations. With the potential black spot taken out of the equation, there was no longer a distraction weighing them down. In the long run, it didn't matter that there wasn't a 'normal' brain to compare the results with. Anyone could be dosed with a psychoactive compound before being turned into an NLI asset, and this round of subjects were proving that with the latest version of the memetic software, only a limited amount of hand-holding was necessary before they started investigating the interface and teaching themselves how to use it. Ten years of testing, seventy patients in this facility alone, and it was looking like the NLI project was finally ready for market.

# *APEX PROJECT AP\_NLI-10*

## Marion Whark Daily Report #29

Last night's test was a success. All subjects excelling at the use of hypersight, with not a single collision. As you'll no doubt recall from the previous trials, we have never had such a positive result from the first live fire.

The casualty report for Leah Cavendish has undoubtedly been received and reviewed by now, and based on the autopsy carried out this morning I can relay that it appears that the subject was in poorer health than we were lead to believe, with an enlarged left coronary artery, apparently stressed by a narrowing at its most distal portion leading the subject to suffer an acute myocardial infarction. This is of course rare in someone of such a young age.

Doctor Markham is currently under the impression that the subject had an undiagnosed case of systematic hypertension, and I shall be thoroughly investigating how the patient managed to become inducted into the trial, let alone make it to this stage without the abnormality being observed.

On a more positive note, the subjects are deep into Phase Two, and are progressing beyond our expectations. At least one of them has taken the initiative to explore beyond the basics they are being taught, and Subject8 is monitoring and reporting all Network chatter whilst he prepares for Phase Three, which has been moved up in the schedule due to the NLI-10 subjects' aptitude.

If all continues according to the amended plan for this latest NLI trial, we will not only have six viable subjects, but a fully operational procedure by the time it is complete.

The lights came up in the living quarters, and as the group went to breakfast they no longer needed to converse out loud, each having become accustomed to communication through the Network.

*'This is like something out of a movie.'* said Pete, unable to actually pick a specific title, but assuring the others it was *definitely* like something that could only happen in a film.

The nurse and orderlies took them along the hallway leading back out to the entrance into the daylight, where they were taken to one of the sideways-cylinder buildings.

*'What is this?'* Alex asked, to no reaction from the nurse.

“Sorry, what is this?” she asked out loud, forgetting that apart from the other five, nobody could hear her thoughts.

At the far end of the room were cardboard cut-outs of men, women and children, and in front of the group were boxes of bean bags.

“This is a test of the targeting system.” said the nurse. “The intention of this trial is to hit the men, and avoid the women or children.”

*'On behalf of my gender, I'm going to take that personally.'* said Pete, to chuckles from the others.

The nurse waited for them to compose themselves after the joke only they could hear.

“Everyone take a beanbag and have a throw, let's see how you do without the targeting first.”

The group did as instructed, and all but one either didn't reach the targets, or ended up taking a woman or child out in the process. Alex's bag hit a male cut-out straight in the face, throwing him back against the wall, before falling flat on the ground. The others looked at her in amazement.

*'Targeting.'* she said, over the Network. *'It's right here.'*

The group found themselves being offered an invitation to her projection, and upon accepting it, had Alex's point of view layered over their own, passing through menus until she came to the targeting options, and then activated the settings. She was then able to pick a target in her UI, choose the force, and activate an automated procedure that Micah called 'a macro', which took control of her arm and fired off the beanbag with pinpoint precision, hitting the target dead on. Before too long they were all hitting their targets accurately, and once the 'hostiles' were knocked to the ground,



threw the beanbags at one another, which were caught or dodged based on yet further options in the targeting menu.

At lunch, they discussed the reasons behind the targeting features in the operating system.

*'It's got to be for military use, right?'* asked Farah.

*'Or for sale to the highest sportsman bidding... imagine a golfer or football player who could hit a target without breaking a sweat?'* said Rob.

*'Military makes more sense though, for all of this. Imagine an elite fighting force that can turn off exhaustion, pain, anxiety or hunger, hit a target miles away, that's fucking terrifying.'* said Sarah.

*'With the automation functions, and the right mental cleansing, they wouldn't be people any more.'* said Micah *'I mean, soldiers do awful things at the best of times, but imagine if they turned off their empathy, and ran on robot mode...'*

*'Killer robot mode.'* Pete added, sending a chill through the group's spines.

In a dark room deep in the facility, behind a door none of the subjects had walked through or even seen, a tall muscular blonde man sat at a cloud-connected typewriter. His pale sun-starved hands whittled back and forth across the keyboard, transcribing the unspoken conversation that was happening over the Network.

**Pete:** *Killer robot mode.*

**Rob:** *Well, that's fucking terrifying. Thanks for that.*

**Pete:** *My absolute pleasure. I bring joy and light to your day, like a unicorn shitting rainbows and glitter.*

**(laughs)**

**Alex:** *It doesn't matter what the unicorn shits, shit is still shit.*

The man sipped at a protein shake and listened intently to their voices, continuing to type with one hand. He absorbed the cadence and dialect, linguistic choices and tonal shifts. He had never met these people, and yet he knew them. Between their files, personality reports, eavesdropping on their thoughts and now Networked conversations, he knew them inside and out, biding his time until he was activated.

Whark read the live feed coming from the blonde man's typewriter. She had a great disdain for his insistence on using archaic mechanical keys, when a tablet or laptop would have sufficed. They had spent the three months of his trial, and the years since, attempting to wipe him of all his infuriating personality traits and yet this one remained. It was as if one small part of his personality was so ingrained that no amount of mental cleansing or re-education could scrub it clean.

***Farah:** Do you think we should worry about their intentions? I mean, if they're going to use this for military means, should we try and fail? Give them bad results and take them back to square one?*

***Micah:** I doubt we're the first trial... and I don't think even a small failure would put them off at this point, not when we've already shown them so much promise.*

***Alex:** So, we just keep on keepin' on? Proving to them that people can become killer robots and it's a great fucking idea?*

***Rob:** What do you expect us to do? Just start failing?*

***Alex:** I don't know, but something needs to be done.*

***Sarah:** We'll come up with something. Together. The six of us have made it this far, we can work this out.*

Whark watched the words appear on her screen and grimaced. The tones she had implemented were suppressing the memories of Leah, but they were playing in lieu of the sonics that crushed subversive attitudes. The calming tones were the very reason the subjects had been acting perfectly for the duration of the experiment. Now, they were starting to consider revolt. She decided it was time to introduce a calming influence. Calling the nurse, Whark informed her that the tests that afternoon were to be postponed, and instructed the orderlies to set up the re-education room “straight a-fucking-way”. It was time for Phase Three to begin.

The group had an extended lunch break. Whark eventually walked down to the mess hall to inform them of a change to their schedule.

“We've got a little firmware update for the operating system, if you'll come with me please.” she started walking to the door without waiting for a response.

“Firmware?” Rob asked Micah

“It's software that changes how hardware works, like when Windows or OSX gives you little updates. But I guess this is for how the OS runs in our heads, right Miss Whark?”

She huffed an agreement to his statement, leading them through to the room she had the orderlies set up, sitting them down on the six leather chairs lined up in a row, ordering them to close their eyes and breath deeply. Once they had begun to do so, Whark left the room and returned to her office to observe the procedure far from the sonics, knowing the adverse effects it would have. On her watch she cycled through the tonal registers and picked the one labelled *'Phase Three Initiation'*.

In the re-education room, the sounds reverberating through the walls, that had been following the group for the last two days, fell silent. As they sat in their chairs in the darkness, the fog was clearing in their memories. Imagery and conversations once suppressed were returned to them from the tonal haze, each slowly coming to a realisation that one of their number was missing.

*'Something's wrong.'* said Rob. *'Someone's not here.'*

*'I know... I think I see them.'* said Farah. *'Little blonde girl, young and sweet, but I can't quite picture her face properly.'*

*'Here.'* said Alex, sharing an image of Leah that had fully returned. *'Is that her?'*

The three dimensional projection of Leah hung in the air in front of them all.

*'Who was she?'* asked Sarah.

*'It's like her name is on the tip of my tongue, but something's stopping me from remembering.'* said Pete.

*'Do you hear that?'* said Micah. *'There's no noise, the room tones aren't playing.'*

*'You think they were interfering with our memories?'* Sarah asked.

*'They must have been. But then why have they stopped them?'*

“Leah!” Rob shouted, out loud. He was exasperated as the name suddenly came to him. “Where did she go? What did they do to her?”

*'She was running with us.'* said Alex. *'I don't remember what happened after that...'*

*'We got in the car.'* said Farah. *'There were, sounds were playing through the speakers- - '*

*'Then we forgot her.'* Pete added. *'Like, straight away.'*

*"We've got to find her."* said Rob.

*'Before that we have to block the tones out.'* Micah said *'If they turn them back on, we're going to forget this all over again.'*

He got up, walked over to the door and grabbed the handle. It didn't respond.

*'Locked?'* asked Sarah, to a nod. *'Do you know how those locks work? They're locked for us, but unlock for the staff.'*

*"I don't care about the tones or the locks, we'll block out the sounds and break the doors down if we have to, we've got to find Leah."* said Rob, getting up from his chair.

*'He's losing it.'* Micah said to Sarah.

*'Don't say that!'* she said.

Rob stomped to the door, pushing Micah out of the way and started kicking at it, but it refused to move at his command.

*'I'm not saying this to the group, I've set up a VPN, it's just a conversation between the two of us.'*

*'What can we do?'* she asked.

*'The door's not going to budge.'* he said *'It's got locking mechanisms all along the sides of the frame, and probably into the floor and ceiling too. It's only wood covering the front and back, looked like metal all the way through.'*

*'What about the lock?.'* she asked.

*'Looks like some kind of smartlock, runs through a NeuralNet I reckon. The staff probably have RFID chips implanted in their hands, or biometric profiles stored in the system that give them authorisation to open the doors, maybe it's hooked up to FaceRecog? There are cameras by pretty much every door.'*

*'So there's no way past it?'* she said *'Other than through their NeuralNet...'* a smile started to form on her face.

*'Yeah... why are you smiling?'*

She shared the memory of the lights in the memory-tagging room going out, coming back on and her being able to see not only what was in front of her eyes, but from every other camera in the building.

*'That's not possible...'* said Micah. *'Unless - -'*

His words were cut off as the the room shook with vibrations, sonics

echoing through the walls louder than ever before. All six of them were knocked to the ground, heads pounding, pressure building inside their brains, digging claws deep into their neural tissue as it made its way from the back of their heads to encompass their minds, filling their heads with smoke, clouding all thoughts. It was disabling every manual function from their motor cortex, throwing nerve impulses under assault, spasms rocketed through every limb, as the sonics made their way through their hippocampus, forcing synapses to misfire, rewriting memories, removing images and replacing them. They struggled to hold on to the projection of Leah that Alex shared, tried to relive conversations, attempted and failed at blocking out the sounds and projecting the memories before they could be contaminated.

The projections weren't being deleted. They were being altered. The face of the blonde girl was a distant reminiscence. Then a half-remembered dream. Then it was gone. In her place, in the memories which Leah once lay, was someone new. A man they didn't know, a tall muscular blonde stranger that didn't have a name. Then he *did* have a name. A clear face. Played a part in every memory for the last month. He had been there with them through it all, from stepping out of the cars to their tour, the first night through to the first test, alongside them every step of the way, every memory they had made in the last four weeks, laughing and drinking at dinner, running alongside them through the streets of Glasgow, and he was there with them, in that very room before the test that hadn't yet begun.

The group woke up in darkness. Their internal clocks telling them five hours had passed, but they couldn't remember anything beyond stepping into the room and taking their seats as instructed. The door unlocked and swung open. Whark stood, silhouetted in the halogen glow of the hallway.

"Did you enjoy your nap?" she asked, to much confusion as the group searched through their memories up until their blackout.

"It was a sleep study?" asked Pete, a hazy memory forming in front of his mind's eye.

"Indeed. And you all did a marvellous job of it. Why don't you go get yourself some dinner..." she held the door open for the subjects, as all seven of them left the room.

Sitting round a table in the mess hall, none of them felt like eating.

*'It's so weird.'* said Alex. *'I don't remember a thing about the test. I don't even remember falling asleep.'*

*'I guess that means we're great at sleep studies, huh?'* said Pete.

*'Do you feel like you slept? I feel like shit.'* said Farah.

*'I wouldn't worry about it, sure we'll get a great night's sleep tonight.'* said Liam.

The others were compelled to agree.

Marion Whark watched on her terminal as her subjects sat around their table and conversed through the Network, as if Liam had been with them from the beginning. Installing him in the group meant that she was no longer able to keep track of the content of their discussions, but it didn't matter. The re-education was a success, and they had accepted him as one of their own with no immediate adverse side effects. If there was any further dissent, he would act as a calming influence, bring order to the group.

As she watched them shuffle through the hallway to the living quarters, she couldn't wait to take her toys out the box as the weeks went on, and fuck up their memories a little more.

Micah couldn't sleep. Even when he altered neurotransmitter levels to flood his brain with dopamine, it wasn't effective. He felt as if something in his subconscious was fighting the desire for rest. He double-checked hormone levels, projecting an article he had read years previous about the biological functions of sleep, and proceeded to regulate melatonin in the hope it might entrain his circadian rhythm as the paper described. When that didn't work, he started manually altering his blood pressure, to no avail. After hours of trying to fall asleep and failing, he gave up rewiring his biochemistry, and spent the night staring at the red LED shining out in the darkness under the A-Eye camera. Watching it as it watched him, waiting for the room lights to come on to signal a new day had dawned.

After a shower, the group sat around the table in the mess hall, all in good spirits. Micah was exhausted, but didn't want to display symptoms to his peers. He duplicated the neurotransmitter release from his memory of taking modafinil. As he knocked a coffee back, blocking the effects of the caffeine so as to not interfere with his biological tinkering, he was finally starting to feel awake again, and involved himself in the Network chatter that he had pushed to the background.

"How are we feeling this morning?" asked Whark, as she walked past the orderlies at the door, a genuine smile on her face.

"Fantastic!" said Liam. "Best sleep I've had since I got here. That firmware update worked a charm!"

The others concurred.

"I'm very glad to hear it. How do you feel about another day outside?"

"Sounds great!" said Alex. "I can't tell y'how much I've missed the sun on my skin."

"This is Scotland, Ms Hartley." Whark sneered. "You'll be lucky if you see a ray amongst the clouds. Do please finish up and follow the

orderlies out as soon as you can.” she turned and headed to the door before the last word left her lips.

She didn't care for her toys up close, only wishing to play with them from the overpriced-yet-incredibly-comfortable chair in her office.

Twenty minutes later, the group were lined up above ground in the main stretch of the camp, where an army-style assault course had been created for them. They looked out over the tyres, barbed wire, mud pits and walls ahead whilst the nurse gave them instructions and a time limit. They had three minutes to get through the quarter-mile of obstacles. Without instruction, they oxygenated their blood to its fullest extent, and launched themselves at the course one by one. The targeting system put every foot down exactly at the centre of each tyre, and a macro had them crawling under the barbed wire with ease. At the wall, they redirected blood flow, increased strength in their legs to jump and kick off the wall to clamber up the ten foot peak. It was all coming so naturally to them, and as with their run down Buchanan Street, it felt like a joy to be operating their modifications at full speed. Next was a thirty foot rope that had to be climbed up to a tower of scaffolding, which further blood flow redirection and re-prioritising of strength had them climbing with their arms alone. Once at the top, they clambered down the other side of the tower to a forty foot long patch of sand. As they stepped onto it, hairs pricked up on the back of their necks, haptic feedback in their feet telling them where it was safe to step, as if a sixth sense was predicting buried objects in the ground. After the minefield, was a deep scaffolding tower that led to the finish line. Below were tree stumps laid out every ten feet, a scaffolding pole every five feet above them. They jumped to the first tree stump, then up to the bar and swung to the second stump, leaping again to the next bar along, sending their priorities of strength and agility back and forth between arms and legs.

By the time they had all arrived at the finish line it was obvious that three minutes was more than enough time, and they were sent through again with a time limit of two minutes. This time, they automated the entire path, recycled the experience of their first run through the obstacles to beat their previous times, and arrived just on the two minute mark. The nurse congratulated them, even though she knew they had all cheated.

“It's time for the stakes to be raised...” she said.



Now they would have ninety seconds, and new obstacles to avoid. She tapped her watch and the automated door on one of the cylindrical buildings opened of its own accord. A hum emanated from deep inside, that became a high pitched buzz, and in moments, twenty A-Eye drones flew out of the building, each taking up a place along the course.

“You have ninety seconds. Alex, you're up first... Go!”

Alex burst on to the track, reliving the second run, but forcing her body to move faster, increasing the automation speed. In her periphery, she saw a drone flying towards her from the left. While the macro was in control of her movements, she switched to hypersight. The drone's path became clear, as if moving in slow motion whilst darting through the course in real time. Taking control of her body, Alex leaped as it flew for her feet. Looking around for her next assailant, she concentrated on the sounds around her, siphoning out the noise of the world, the sounds of her own footsteps and breath hard in her chest, to hear just the buzzing. She dropped back down the wall as a drone flew right for her head, missing by only inches. A running jump had her back on course, reaching the top of the wall and coming off the other side when an impact came from behind, knocking her to the floor.

“You're out!” shouted the nurse, turning to the remaining six. “Always remember to keep an eye on your behinds, ok?”

They nodded.

“Pete, your turn. Go!”

Pete launched himself at the assault course, automation set as fast as it could go, whilst he looked around in hypersight for drones. The first came towards his head whilst he was at the tyres, and he assumed control, ducking before pouncing at the wall. He climbed up and peeked over, one hundred and sixty-five degrees of vision all in pinpoint clarity, two drones were coming towards him, but there was a sound from behind. He threw himself over the wall just as a drone flew towards him, reactivating automation and speeding past the two coming from the front. As he made his way up the rope, he resumed manual functions, swinging it left and right to avoid drones coming for his body, reaching the top of the scaffolding tower and avoiding a further two drones coming for his head from either side, only to be hit in the gut by another that had been hiding its presence

amongst the noise of its brothers. Recovering from the collision, he rejoined the others.

“Pete learnt from Alex's mistakes, but made one of his own... Now remember, you're a team. If you work together, nothing can stop you! Liam, you're up!”

Liam pounced into the tyres, hypersight flaring. Whispers from the rest of the Network gave him intel on when to duck and weave out of the path of oncoming assailants. Kicking up the wall, he rolled over it as a drone flew towards him, missing him by a hair's breadth. As he climbed up the rope, the drones swooped for him. Alex whispered through his mind, advising to use his feet to grab the rope beneath and swing it in the direction of his pursuers, knocking them out of the sky. He reached the peak and climbed down, obeying the guiding voices of his teammates to swing left and right on the scaffolding bars, pull his body up or drop to the level below as the drones became agitated and more aggressive. Landing at the minefield, he took over from the automation and projected a map for safe footfall, the rest of the group connecting to it and adding their observations. He jumped across it, grabbing handfuls of sand and throwing it at oncoming assailants his Network warned him of, gumming up their propellers and forcing them to crash or land. The final hurdle was ahead, he jumped and swung across the scaffolding, from stump to stump, kicking drones out of the sky until he landed at the finish line to cheers and applause from the group.

*'Fuck yeah!'* Alex screamed across the Network.

*'I could've done that...'* said Pete.

*'You'll do it next time, buddy!'* said Liam, reassuringly.

“Well done everyone!” said the nurse. “Record time, Liam! Rob, think you can beat it?”

Rob said nothing, looking anxiously at the track ahead.

“Come on Rob, it's your turn.” she said, as he pursed his lips.

“I'm not feeling so good...” he said.

“Get the blood pumping, c'mon, you can do it!” she said.

He wasn't convinced.

*'Come on Rob.'* said Liam, his words whispering through Rob's head.

*'You can do this. It's not a competition, we're all a team! The best time of one of us is the best time for all of us. It's not about who's the winner, it's about kicking flying robots in the face!'*

Rob tried to ignore that as Liam spoke, each word was accompanied by a thumping in his head, pain starting to wash across his brain as the whispers penetrated his thoughts.

The others all chipped in with similar words of enthusiasm, and reluctantly, Rob took his place at the starting line.

“Are you ready?” asked the nurse.

Rob nodded.

“Go!”

He darted through the tyres manually, struggling to find the automation settings and activate them.

*'Watch out behind you!'* whispered Liam through his thoughts, sending a spike of agony through Rob's skull.

He stopped and leant over, holding his head, the drone missing him by sheer luck. Regaining his composure, he found the automation controls and got through the rest of the tyres and barbed wire, kicking against the wall and hurtling himself over it.

*'Two 'o' clock!'* whispered Pete.

*'It's coming for your legs!'* Farah added.

Rob turned and saw the drone heading towards him, flying low against the ground. He leaped over it and started climbing the rope.

*'Do like Alex told me! Grab the rope with your feet and swat the fuckers!'* Liam's whisper rumbled through Rob's head, he lost his grasp and started falling, hurtling towards the ground. The automation kicked in, a survival mechanism, his hand shooting out to grab the rope. Taking a moment to recover, he pulled himself back up to the top of the tower.

*'Are you ok?'* Sarah asked.

*'Yeah... I think...'* he replied, as he started to climb down the scaffolding.

*'Are you sure?'* asked Liam.

The question sent a surge of neurons misfiring.

Rob's fingers seized up, refusing to hold his weight in their grasp. He fell. Head ricocheting off the next bar down, arms and legs clattering off the bars at the sides, hurtling to the ground, taking out a drone as he collapsed at the foot of the tower.

The group rushed over to him as his seizure continued, sending queries through the Network as they ran, asking if he was okay. The

messages all bounced back around their own skulls like an echo. They stood over him, Farah holding them back, ordering them not to interfere whilst the seizure continued, his body quivering, eyes absent.

Whark watched the spectacle from her terminal, instructing the drones to move around and zoom in so she could see his reactions from every angle. She grimaced as the seizure came to an end, and before he passed out, read a word on his lips.

“Leah.”

She stormed out of her office and down the hallway, shrieking at the doctors.

“Prepare a fucking room for a full medical work-up, I want to know why this piece of shit had a fucking seizure out of fucking nowhere.” Coming to the entrance of the facility she saw the orderlies standing guard at the door.

“What the fuck are you doing here? Get a fucking gurney and take that shaking cunt to the doctor. Then prepare the re-education room again. We need to make sure the new memories fucking stuck.” They cowered at her shrieks and did as they were ordered whilst Whark strutted to the obstacle course to evaluate the patient for herself.

*'Who's Leah?' asked Farah, as she cradled Rob's head, holding her sleeve to his bleeding skull.*

*'Must be some old girlfriend, I guess?' said Liam. 'Never heard him mention her before.'*

*'You think remembering her made him seize?' asked Pete. 'I best not remember any of my exes then... God I don't even **want** to remember any of my exes!'*

*'Not the fucking time, Pete.'* said Alex.

Micah listened to the conversation, but didn't participate. He slowly stepped closer to Sarah whilst the others talked amongst themselves. Gingerly, he reached his hand towards her, slipping his fingers under the back of her shirt, and as he made skin-to-skin contact with the small of her back, fired up a subroutine he had found. In an instant, the world around them froze.

Sarah looked around at the scene. Rob lying on the ground, his head in Farah's lap, the rest of the group around him as worried as she was. She turned to make eye contact with Micah, but couldn't feel her body move. There was no twist of the head, no sensation of muscles stretching and relaxing with the turn, and yet she saw him straight-on. A projected rotation of her viewpoint, like wading through an underwater dream.

*'What is this?' she asked him.*

*'Tactile Networking.'* he said. *'Something they had buried deep in the code, I guess they're going to activate it with the sonics at some point, but I skipped ahead on the reading.'*

*'Why are you doing this?' she asked. 'Why now? We should be looking after Rob!'*

*'Because the Network can't be trusted.'*

*'What are you talking about?' she asked. 'It's only the seven of us, I can feel there's only seven of us... well... six of us right now... Rob's not responding, it's like he's blocked from the server, what do they call it, a four-oh-four error?'*

*'Why do you think that is?' asked Micah.*

*'I don't know... Maybe it's a bad reaction to the firmware update?'*

*'I don't think it was just the firmware.'* he said, proceeding to replay the events before Rob's seizure in a projection around the two of them, shifting viewpoint, getting in close to Rob to see his reactions.

*'Two 'o' clock!'*

*'It's coming for your legs!'*

Micah and Sarah watched as Rob turned to see the drone coming towards him, jumping over it, clambering for the rope. The projection paused.

*'See.'* said Micah. *'Everything's fine there.'*

He resumed the memory.

*'Do like Alex told me! Grab the rope with your feet and swat the fuckers!'*

Rob's grasp on the rope faltered and he began to fall. Micah put the memory on pause again.

*'That! Do you see that? Liam's voice in his head makes him start to fuck up, sends signals to the wrong part of his brain, makes his hands lose grip.'*

*'What are you saying?'* asked Sarah. *'That he's **allergic** to Liam?'*  
Micah spun the projection on to where Rob was at the top of the tower.

*'Are you sure?'* asked Liam.

The couple watched closely as Rob's fingers seized and gave up trying to hold on. He started to fall. Micah paused it before his head hit the first scaffolding bar.

*'I'm saying Liam isn't right. He isn't part of the group.'*

*'What do you mean? He's been with us since the beginning!'* Sarah said, taking over projection duties and bringing up the first memory she had of seeing him, stepping out of the car on the first day. *'See, he's right there!'*

*'Is he?'* asked Micah, shifting around the projection, coming close to Liam.

*'What are you trying to prove? That he looks as good close up as far away?'*

*'Walk around him.'* said Micah, holding an arm out, gesturing for her to proceed ahead of him.

She stepped through the three-dimensional memory, and whilst everything else moved, Liam was a two-dimensional representation, like the cardboard cut-outs they had thrown beanbags at.

*'What the fuck is going on?'* she asked.

*'Pull up another memory of him.'* he said, and she did so. They were at dinner in the restaurant, Whark looking at Liam with disdain.

*'I don't remember her looking like she disliked him so much.'* she said, walking around Liam's two dimensional cut-out sitting in her memory. *'It feels like he's her favourite... but she looks so angry.'*

*'What do you want to bet he's like that in every memory you have of him?'*

Sarah didn't want to bet.

*'What does this mean?'* she asked.

*'He's not really our friend.'* Micah replied. *'We haven't even known him a day!'*

*'How is that possible?'* she asked, *'This isn't possible, there's not some grand conspiracy to put a fake person in our heads...'*

*'That's the firmware talking.'* said Micah. *'He's only been with us since the update.'*

*'What are you talking about?'* said Sarah, pulling up the memory of the group walking in to the room, seeing seven chairs and each of them taking a seat in the row.

*'Check out my memory...'* he said, showing her his version of events. Six of them walking in, six chairs in the room.

*'What have you done, edited your memory? Is that the next-next lesson?'* she spat, exasperated.

*'This is what **actually** happened.'* he replied. *'Without the edit.'*

*'I don't believe this for a second, I'm going to tell Whark, something must be wrong with your programming...'*

Sarah dissipated the projection and walked towards Whark to speak to her. The scene was still frozen.

*'I made the connection with you.'* said Micah *'**I'm** in control of when it ends.'*

Sarah turned to him and glared.

*'Well fucking end it then!'*

*'Not yet. Let me show you what really happened yesterday.'*

He pulled the memory back up and made Sarah watch as six of them entered the room and sat on the six chairs. The room noise trickling off, the memories of Leah returning to each of them, along with the realisation that the tones in the walls were manipulating their minds. Holo-Sarah shared her memory of connecting through the NeuralNet before the sonics started pounding through the speakers in the walls. He shared his point of view at that moment, as he disabled his hearing before the tones could take effect, mimicking the symptoms of the others as they fell to the floor, grabbing his head, feigning agony over his body, whilst the others had their memories rewritten to remove Leah and replace her with Liam over the entire month.

Sarah watched as Micah feigned unconsciousness whilst the orderlies entered the room, picked each of them up and put them back in the chairs, bringing in and drilling a seventh chair into its place in the floor. They then held the door open for Liam and avoided eye contact, reverential, like they feared him. He lay back in the leather chair, sinking in comfortably and closed his eyes, waiting for his new friends to wake up.

*'None of that happened.'* said Sarah, conflicted by the perversion of Micah's memory. She knew she had to tell Whark, have him fixed, but there was something stopping her, a feeling deep down that she couldn't describe.

*'Sarah, up until now you trusted me, right?'* said Micah, looking at her dead in the eyes.

*'I don't know...'*

*'You shared your memory of connecting with the NeuralNet –'*

*'I don't remember any of that!'*

*'Well it happened.'*

He replayed the memory she shared with him, projecting it around the two of them, giving her back the experience she showed him, reminding her what it was like to see with a thousand electronic eyes.

*'That was your memory.'* he said. *'I wasn't in the room, so how could I have your memory?'*

*'I don't know, maybe making up memories is Wednesday's session. You're a smart guy, you can probably work out how to scam the system.'*

*'You know it's true. You know you trust me.'* he said, taking her by the hand. Projection of him touching projection of her. Eyes locked in their imaginations whilst the world around them sat still.

*'So trust me when I say this is for your own good...'* He took his other hand and held it against her forehead.

Sarah felt a static shock that set her mind on fire. The tactile connection within tactile connection was boiling the brain in her skull. She screamed as the memories of Liam reverted back to those of Leah, the inconsistencies fixed and replaced by Micah's memories. She saw the last month play out in front of her, knowing that each and every situation was a complete memory, repaired with his help. Her screams continued as he delved deeper, took out the programming of the firmware update, removed the controls that were keeping her mood stable, her desire for revolt quashed. Micah gave her back the parts of her personality that were deactivated by the re-education room's sonics.

He let go of her projected head and gave her a moment to recover.

*'Do you remember?'* he asked.

She looked at him through bloodshot eyes, wiping away tears that only existed within the connection.

*'I remember everything,'* she said. *'And I have to share something with you.'*

Taking a leap of faith after being saved by a man she barely knew, Sarah showed him the memories of her parents' death, the discovery of their



hidden cache of information about APEX, her infiltration into the experiment so she could try and find data that could take the company down. Micah took in all the memories and smiled at her.

*'We can do this.'* he said. *'But we can't do it alone, and we can't do it with Liam watching over our shoulder.'*

*'So what should do about him?'* she asked.

*'First we need to know that Rob's ok...'* he said, pulling all the projections back, returning to the frozen scene of Rob surrounded by the others, Whark still footsteps away from the group.

*'Are you ready?'* he asked.

She nodded. He pulled his hand away from the small of her back, severing the connection.

“What the fuck happened here?” Whark shouted, the anger rippling towards the group with every *click-clack* of her heels.

“He fell. Had a seizure and fell.” said Farah.

“How's his head? Is he bleeding?” Whark asked.

“A bit.” said the nurse. “Miss Zare was straight on it, putting pressure on the wound as soon as the seizure stopped.”

“Good work, Miss Zare.” Whark said, to a polite but distracted smile from Farah.

The orderlies bumbled over with a gurney and picked Rob up, hoisting him clumsily onto the stretcher and wheeling him back into the facility.

“I imagine the rest of you aren't in the mood to carry on, are you...” Whark said, with an annoyed sigh. “Take the rest of the day off. When the doctor has news about Mr. McGovern I'll be sure to pass it along.”

She followed the orderlies path back to the entrance, leaving the nurse to take the group inside. Worries and concerns were shared across the Network chatter, all calmed and diffused swiftly by Liam's influence and the re-education. Sarah and Micah sat separate from the group in the rec room, pretending to read whilst they conversed over a VPN he set up.

*'We've got to get into the NeuralNet, see what they're doing to him.'* said Micah.

*'How? There's no electrodes on us, no terminal here...'* said Sarah.

*'There's got to be another way.'* he replied *'We need to understand how your tactile connection worked in the memory room.'*

He pulled up the projection and they looked closely at Sarah's experience in the chair, listened as the thoughts ran through her mind. *If the computer could connect to her then she could connect to it.* He studied the wires trailing back to the terminal, the cameras observing from the corner of the room. Playing forwards, he watched as her consciousness infiltrated the NeuralNet and took up residency in its pathways. Her projected self navigating corridors of digital light, turned the ephemeral notion of a machine's circuitry into a manifestation she could comprehend. Playback paused as she saw through a thousand eyes. He sunk deeper in to the memory, felt what she felt, stretched out mental fingers to explore what she had only glimpsed in her brief access, reaching out across the systems in that moment to see how far the connection reached. He ended the projection and turned to her.

*'It's all connected.'* he said. *'The cameras, the door locks, the terminals, all of it. And we have Superuser access.'*

*'Superuser?'*

*'Like an Admin, but better. It's root control over every system. I bet we could even dig deep into the global settings of the facility's NeuralNet and revoke the staff's privileges if we wanted.'*

*'So, we can connect through, what, the door lock?'* she asked.

*'If it's tied into the wider system, yeah.'*

*'So what are we waiting for?'* she asked, getting up and walking towards the toilet.

*'Where are you going?'* he asked, glancing up ever so briefly as she walked away. Not following, so as to appear engaged in his book should the others, and Liam in particular, be watching.

*'Can we share a tactile connection over the VPN?'* she asked, as she approached the door.

*'Probably?'* he said. *'I'd have to dig into the permissions...'*

*'Work fast.'* she said, grabbing the handle of the door, drawing on the memory of her accidental connection with the NeuralNet, automating the thought process to engage with the Network.

Micah rushed through menus, altering settings and permissions, and finished just in time to join Sarah as the connection was made. Their mind's eyes were shrouded in darkness.

When the light returned, their physical bodies were left behind. The two of them had no eyes of their own, sharing the sight of a thousand eyes across the facility.

*'Where do we go from here?'* she asked, looking for him with the cameras. She couldn't see him in the pathways, and her thoughts echoed through the imagined Network space like a choir.

*'Shit!'* said Micah.

She blinked away from the A-Eye feeds and found that she was once again surrounded by tunnels of digital light, signals whipping back and forth in the imagined space. She had no body, and nor did Micah.

*'We can go anywhere...'* he said, from somewhere nearby.

*'I can't see you...'* she said.

*'We don't have forms here... Not unless we make them... We're going to have to project something.'*

In front of her, light coalesced, took the form of a silhouette that was pulling up data from around the Network. He had no arms or legs, instead ten sets of tentacles emanated from his projected head, sorting through data at the speed of thought. He charted the positions of the cameras, and looked out through the A-Eyes to see how far they went.

*'They've got the whole facility wired for cameras, audio recording, and there's something else...'* He said whilst tethering Sarah's much more mundane form to his with a stray tentacle as he followed whispersignals along the wireless spectrum, tracing the path to a single terminal. Turning the webcam on, the two of them looked out over the London skyline.

*'I've seen that view before.'* said Sarah.

*'Me too. it was Whark's office when I was recruited.'*

*'I thought you were recruited in Liverpool?'* she asked.

*'And you in London...'* he replied, turning his projected head to her astral form.

*'So which is this?'* asked Sarah.

Micah pulled up the camera's metadata, discerning their position and IP addresses.

*'It's in the facility.'* he said, projecting a map in front of their disembodied sight.

*'She's taken this office around the country, and now set it up in the basement? That's fucking tragic.'* said Sarah.

*'This is the only terminal with outside access.'* he said, his mind creating a doorway that represented the wider world, the global A-Eye NeuralNet. He walked towards it, and took a virtual step beyond the threshold. In an instant, he lost all control of his thoughts and actions.

Watching the world through billions of eyes, he was overwhelmed, couldn't process the sights and sounds, colours and light. Agony wrenched its way through his digital consciousness as he tried to wrestle free, pull himself back into the safety of the facility's NeuralNet, but his disembodied self wasn't responding. He felt something wrap around him, like a lasso grabbing hold of his projected form. Light overcame him.

A black and white blur stared up at him, slowly coming in to focus. A book. He looked around, and was back in the rec room, Sarah turned the handle and stepped into the toilet.

*'Was that you?' he asked. 'Did you pull me back?'*

*'You're not the only one who can make a tentacle...'* she said.

*'Too much action the first time out I guess, huh?'*

*'We've got to go back.'* she said.

*'I'm not sure I want to jump in with both feet right now.'* he said, putting a hand to his aching head, his body recreating sympathetic pains for the suffering his astral form went through.

*'We don't have a choice.'* she said, sharing a projection of the thousand eyes, zooming in to one. Rob on a gurney, as Whark and the doctor stood over him.

"What the fuck happened to him?" said Whark.

"I've only just begun my examination..." said the doctor, distracted as he configured consoles to monitor activity from the electrodes on Rob's head.

"Well hurry the fuck up." she said, pacing around him. The Doctor looked at the readings, then over to Rob.

"This isn't at all good." he said.

"Fucking **what** isn't?!" she shrieked.

"His neural pathways are all over the show. He's rejecting the sonogenetic switches we installed in regards to Subject8."

"So fix it." she spat.

“You can't just 'fix' it. We're going to need to wipe the firmware and start again.”

“Fine. Fucking fine. I'll have the numbfuck twins have the room set up for a wipe and re-program.”

“We can't be sure he won't regress like the others...” said the Doctor.

“I can't be sure you won't end up hung from the rafters by your own *fucking* entrails.” she said, storming out of the room.

The doctor started removing the electrodes and preparing his patient to be moved, when Rob started to stir.

“... Leah...” he said, groggily.

“Don't worry, my boy.” said the doctor, putting a mask over Rob's face and turning the valve on the sevoflurane. “You won't remember a thing soon enough.”

Sarah walked back out to the rec room, joining Micah at a couch and picking her book back up.

*'We have to stop them.'* she said.

*'Not alone we can't.'* he replied *'And not without giving ourselves away. We might have control over the system, but we have to learn how to loop camera feeds or delete entire logs...'*

*'Then we best learn. Don't you need to use the bathroom?'* she said, turning to him.

Micah looked around the room at their peers, playing pool and watching TV, then glanced over to the camera. Nobody was any the wiser that they had been infiltrating the system. He put his book down and made his way across the room as Sarah sent him the memory of the automated connection process she had used. He touched the door handle, and once again, they were in darkness.

*'Where do we find out about the camera feeds?'* asked Sarah.

Micah trawled through the data with his tentacles, following the pathways back to the servers that they were stored on.

*'We're in luck. Everything's logged in-house.'* he said, gleaming what he could as he swiped through the feeds. *'It only gets backed up to the cloud every six hours.'* He pulled up the clock. It was four forty-three. *'We don't have the time to do it before the next backup cycle'.*

*'So we let them go through with it?' asked Sarah. 'Let them wipe him and fuck with his brain some more?'*

Micah moved away from the camera feeds and tried to find the audio controls for the facility.

*'Not necessarily... maybe we can mess with the speaker system.'*

*'What did you say about deleting camera data? What if one of us is on deletion duty as the other is going in and rescuing him?'*

*'How are you going to deal with the guards? Computers are easy to fuck up, people on the other hand...' he started making his way through the logs of the camera feeds.*

*'Maybe we can incapacitate them. If your tactile connection with me could fix my memories maybe we could, I don't know, send them to sleep or something?'*

*'Or something... But we'd need to test it out first.'*

*'So we test it out on each other.' she said.*

*'Are you volunteering?' he asked.*

*'To put you to sleep? Sure.'*

*'Fuck.'*

*'What?' she asked.*

*'This...' he said, pulling up a video feed.*

The Doctor stood over Leah's body, her clothes removed, chest cut open. He dictated to the A-Eye monitoring from the corner of the room.

“Subject's heart appears to have an enlarged left coronary artery...” he looked closer, staring through a screen that magnified the view. “Seems there's a narrowing at the most distal proportion, leading me to believe that the stress of the live fire test was, perhaps, the cause of an acute myocardial infarction. Of course, how such a physical abnormality could be present in a trial with such stringent health requirements, I am unable to say...” Sarah paused the projected video.

*'What does that mean?' asked Sarah.*

*'A heart attack.' Micah said.*

*'How could she have a heart attack?'*

*'I don't know... there's something not right here...' he said, pulling all the metadata tagged with Leah's information, her FaceRecog profile, gait, mannerisms, it was all logged and categorised in the NeuralNet, all up in front of their virtual eyes.*

*'There's time missing.' he said 'Here, as she walks to the memory-tagging room, and here, as she leaves.'*

*'What's happening outside the room at the time?'*

Micah pulled up the feed from the A-Eye monitoring the doorway. Leah entered the room with the nurse. Spinning forward in the feed, Whark entered and the nurse left. The cameras watched the vacant hallway until Whark and Leah eventually walked out together.

*'That doesn't match up with the time **inside** the room...' said Micah. 'Give me a second...'*

He started trawling through logs, piecing together scant bytes of information grabbing them with his tentacles, taking the code apart and putting them back together in the right order, like a billion piece jigsaw puzzle.

*'What are you doing?' asked Sarah.*

*'Nothing's ever truly deleted...' said Micah. 'Not unless you're very smart. And Whark is more arrogant than she is smart... '*

He continued to put the deleted files back together, finding segments scattered across the servers, building a picture of the room. Whark reached for her watch as Leah lay in the chair.

*'Is that where I connected with the NeuralNet the first time?' asked Sarah.*

*'Yeah. Same day, but looks like Leah got a different treatment...'*

The video feed didn't have enough frames to play through in real time, but the audio he had reassembled was mostly complete.

*'See this?' he said, bringing up the waveform. 'The tones in the room change.' he compared them to the ones in his memory of sitting in the chair in the same room. 'This is doing something different... I don't know enough about the code they're transmitting through the sonics, but... what if it doesn't only fuck with our conscious and subconscious minds?'*

*'You think they can use them to send instructions for our bodies to... what, set us up for heart attacks?' she asked.*

*'If you're going to make human robots, wouldn't you want to make a killswitch of some kind?' he said.*

*'What if they've been doing it all along? I don't think I'd have been strong enough to do that assault course when I first got here...' Sarah said.*

*'What if they've been conditioning our brains to send out signals for, I don't know, muscle production or whatever.'*

*'We can make you better, stronger, faster...' said Micah.*

*'How long has it been back in... uh...what would you call it? The real world?'* Sarah asked.

*'Two and a half seconds...' said Micah, looking his internal clock.*

*'Probably too long to just be holding a door handle, huh.'*

*'Let's go back. We can't draw suspicion... We've got 'til six to come up with a plan, right?'*

*'Til the backup starts, yeah. '*

*'Then let's get a fucking plan together.'*

The group were taken through to the mess hall for dinner, and despite Liam's influence making them feel better about Rob's recovery, none of them were particularly hungry.

Micah and Sarah occasionally joined in with the Network chatter, to at least give the impression they were paying attention to the conversation, but spent the majority of the time on their VPN, putting the pieces together to save their friend.

Whark watched as Rob screamed in silent agony, tied to the gurney in the re-education room. The audio was muted on her terminal as the sonics tore his memories to shreds and replaced them with happier ones. Sonogenetic triggers installed to make every memory of Liam and the other five members of the group a happy one, everything else feel like a haze of ambivalence. She needed at least five viable subjects to prove her project was a success. The neurotypical with a 'pre-existing' medical condition was an easy write-off, but another with mental distress and seizures as a reaction to implanted memories was not something she wanted to have to report. She stared at his suffering and smiled, distracting herself with anticipation of tearing more of Sarah's memories apart.

When the procedure ended, she turned the sound back on as the doctor re-entered.

"How are you doing, lad?" he asked.

Rob gasped for breath as the haze of migraine started to subside, his mouth dry, throat bare from screams.



“Leah....” he rasped.

The doctor turned to the camera for Whark's input. She tapped her watch twice and his vibrated. He stepped out of the room and began the procedure over again.

This was exactly what she feared would happen. Just as with Liam and his un-deletable proclivity for the mechanical keys of a typewriter, a single memory remained in Rob. An emotional and physical connection to something, that in spite of frequent attempts, could not be sliced out of his subconscious. She knew that the feeds of Rob's sessions would make their way back to the company, and attempted to conjure a wording in which this could be viewed as a positive step. Deep down, she knew a PR spin was in vain. She would just have to make the other subjects prove themselves exceptional to make up for his breakdown.

The group went through from the mess hall to the living quarters, Micah and Sarah still going back and forth about their plan, even though it was well into the six-to-midnight recording cycle. They lay in their bunks and shared the projection of the facility. They knew the route through to the re-education room, and over dinner, Micah had put together a macro that he was semi-confident would overwrite the access required to leave the living quarters and allow them to enter the testing area. One of them would have to stay connected to the NeuralNet to mask the other's presence as they went through the hallways, but although they had discussed it intently, they still hadn't had a chance to run through the process to enter a normal mind via a tactile connection and incapacitate them. Returning from the bathroom after brushing her teeth, Sarah went past Micah's bunk and smiled at him.

*'Oh, you're kidding...'* he said, as she reached to his forehead, tapping it with her finger.

In an instant the connection was made, she was in his head, immobilising his spinal cord, increasing cerebral vasodilation, releasing dopamine and sending him to sleep. Her finger bounced off his skull, and only a fraction of a second had passed. She smiled to herself and lay in bed, eye on her internal clock for the 15 minutes she had set in the macro to pass before he would wake up.



## **APEX PROJECT AP\_NLI-10**

### **Marion Whark Daily Report #30**

The second live fire exercise once again exceeded expectations. The subjects are not only adapting to the operating system, but evolving with it, understanding and writing automated processes for their bodies to follow.

Networking across the group has increased results tenfold, with stage three of the live fire course being passed in the third attempt – yet another record set by these patients.

Introduction of Subject8 has been seamless, the false memories are proving to be more robust than any of our studies previously. As the week goes on, we shall prepare for the next round of memory enhancements, until culmination at the end of the month, when a complete rewrite will be accomplished, and our subject's minds will be entirely of our own making.

As A-Eye logs will show, Robert McGovern had an incident during the test, the cause of which is still to be determined. I am currently of the suspicion that he, like Leah Cavendish may have had some undiagnosed condition that was not observed by the technicians during the recruitment phase.

An investigation shall be carried out as to who might be responsible. McGovern is currently undergoing further re-education, in the hopes that whatever symptoms he is displaying are purely temporary in nature, and can be easily corrected with minor effect on the results to the rest of the group.

Whark stared at her report, trying to ignore the lump in her throat. She knew there was no way to guarantee that Rob would actually recover, nor did she have any evidence to prove that the remaining five subjects would continue to be viable candidates as the memory alterations continued. Her thought process ceased, as she noticed the webcam above her terminal staring at her, a bright green pinprick of light next to the lens indicating it was operational. She went back to her previous report and added an amendment at the bottom.

Due to security concerns regarding our NeuralNet connection that have been brought to my attention, I shall be completing all further reports from an air-gapped workstation, and have them manually sent on from outside the facility. Whilst this might delay arrival, it seems to me that it is in the best interest of the company to do so.

She sent the report, staring at the light above her screen, suspicious of its watchful glass eye.

Sarah and Micah watched back as Whark's gaze moved from them to behind the terminal, where she then reached and severed the connection to the NeuralNet.

*'Do you think she's on to us?'* asked Sarah, as she withdrew her connection from the door lock, walking back from the bathroom to her bunk.

*'I don't know.'* said Micah. *"If we can get our shit together, hopefully it won't matter."*

The plan was set, but one issue still remained. They couldn't even think about taking the first steps with Liam watching over their shoulders. If he was *'Subject8'*, and they were part of the tenth iteration of the likely-annual experiment, then he had two years on them, honing the skills APEX had imparted him with. Knowing that was based on assumption, but erring on the side of caution, Sarah and Micah agreed that they wouldn't be able to take him down alone.

As soon as he was certain the others were all asleep, Micah slipped away to the bathroom, networking with the door lock and looping the camera feeds. He stitched in footage of him returning from the bathroom from an archive recording to cover his tracks. Sarah joined him in the system, patching in an automated series of temperature fluctuations in rooms across the facility that they hoped would read as fires, motion sensors alerts, and errors in the guard's RFIDs. They lined up four hours of alternating distractions to keep the NeuralNet busy, keep its circuits from detecting the loop surreptitiously placed in the living quarters. She went to Alex's bedside whilst Micah monitored the A-Eye chatter, in case their diversions didn't last as long as they hoped. Sarah interlocked her fingers and flexed them, knuckles cracking before she placed her hands on the sleeping woman's head. She initiated the tactile connection, as Micah had done with her, but rather than the blinding digital light of the NeuralNet, she found herself surrounded by nothingness.

Darkness. Silence. In the connection between the two, Sarah couldn't feel the pathways as easily as in the NeuralNet. From the shadows around her, a wisping haze of dream imagery started flowing, making its way to a whirlwind of light and pictures behind her. At the centre of the cyclone, Alex was walking through a desert projected around her, sand creating itself under her like a conveyor belt, moving with every footstep she took. The sun on the horizon was a forced-perspective trick that lay ahead just out of her reach, the sky a bright shimmer of blue that hung just above their heads.

*'Alex.'* Sarah said, walking into the dream, touching her shoulder, and taking attention from the false sunset.

*'What are you doing here?'* she asked, *'How are you here?'* she reached out a hand to touch Sarah's projected form.

*'They've been lying to us, Alex. Screwing with us from the beginning. We're going to get Rob and get out.'* said Sarah.

*'What are you talking about?'* asked Alex. *'I don't want to go anywhere...'*

*'It's true.'* said Micah, joining the dream through his connection to Sarah. *'They've messed with your memories, see?'*

Alex's dream melted away, replaced by Micah's projection of the six of them at lunch after target practice.

*'Do you think we should worry about their intentions?'* said Farah, as Alex walked around and looked at herself and the others sitting there. *'I mean, if they're going to use this for military means, should we try and fail? Give them bad results and take them back to square one?'*

*She looked from memory-Micah to the Micah projecting himself into her mind.*

*'I doubt we're the first trial...' the projection said 'And I don't think even a small failure would put them off at this point, not when we've already shown them so much promise.'*

She turned to herself, as if knowing somewhere deep down, that she was next to speak.

*'So, we just keep on keepin' on? Proving to them that people can become killer robots and it's a great fucking idea?'*

*'See?'* said Sarah. *'That's you just two days ago, and now you trust them implicitly?'*

*'Where's Liam?'* asked Alex. *'Why isn't he with us here?'*

*'He's not real.'* said Micah. *'He's just another lie, a collection of false memories.'*

*'I don't believe you.'* said Alex.

*'I didn't either.'* said Sarah. *'And then I was forced to accept the truth.'*  
The projection around them changed, lines shifting, shades and colours merging to recreate the obstacle course. Sarah watched her memory, Alex standing where she had been when Micah touched her, Rob flailing on the floor in front of her.

*'Why would you make me watch this again?'* said Alex. *'That's sick! There's something wrong with him and you want to relive it?'*

Sarah played the memory, and the projection she made of Micah came behind Alex, his fingers meeting the small of her back. Every emotion

Sarah had in that connection pulsed through Alex's system, her fears and anxieties, mistrusts and beliefs all being shed as the implanted memories were overwritten one by one by the truth that Micah had stitched back together for Sarah.

*'Those motherfuckers!'* she said as it ended, her personality reinstated. *'I'm going to fuck that Whark bitch up.'*

*'We'll all get a piece, don't you worry.'* said Sarah. *'But there's a shitload of new memories and information we have to pass over, and not a lot of time... Are you ready?'*

*'Load me up, bitches!'* said Alex, a wicked grin on her face at the thought of vengeance.

Micah had packaged up everything they knew about Leah and Rob, along with a how-to guide for tactile networking. The infodump also had all the two of them had learned about traversing the facility's NeuralNet and Sarah's experiment at knocking him out. It was a huge rush of memories and imagery, but he had cut out the emotional subtext to lighten the load, he didn't want to risk blowing out Alex's nervous system with the fear he experienced seeing through the billions of eyes of the worldwide A-Eye network, or the revulsion they both had to watching Leah's autopsy and Rob's agony during his re-education.

The data downloaded, and Alex took a moment to sift through the information she now knew, before waking up and carrying out the next part of the plan.

She went to Pete's bedside, whilst Sarah kneeled down by Farah. A silent count had them both connecting to their sleeping friends simultaneously. They went through the same motions with the two of them as they had just done with Alex, and once they were themselves again, Micah dumped the knowledge in their heads.

All five of them knew the plan. All five of them were awake. It was time to deal with Liam.

*'Are you sure you want to do this?'* Farah asked Sarah. *'You don't have to be the one.'*

*'I won't be alone.'* she replied. *'We'll be in there together.'* She smiled at them then turned to Liam, sleeping soundly in his bunk. She took a deep breath, cracked her knuckles, and laid a hand on his arm.

Darkness enveloped her. The hairs on the back of her projected neck stood on end. The connection didn't feel like it did when she had entered the dreams of her friends. She looked around for the whirlwind of ghostly false-perspective images that formed dreams around the others, but it never came. As she walked imagined footsteps through the black, she knew something was wrong.

*'This doesn't feel right.'* she said.

There was no response.

She reached out with her senses, tried to feel the connection to the others, but something was holding her back.

*'Liam?'* she said, unable to see him in the shadows surrounding her. From somewhere in the distance, she heard a patter of footsteps accompanied by soft gasping. The footsteps became laboured, as if each one was taking great energy to accomplish. Hesitantly, Sarah walked further into the darkness, approaching the sounds.

*'Who's there?'* she asked.

Something grabbed her left hand. Tiny, greying fingers, veins dark, as if traced in soft pencil on pale skin. The arm lead back to tiny, slight shoulders, a neck tight and twisted. Atop it were panicked eyes stricken with broken blood vessels, looking out from behind transparent plastic. The child's face was masked by a thicket of greasy blonde hair, but the eyes shone out, begging Sarah to help, gasping at the bag that was sucked deeper into her mouth with every breath. Sarah heard other footsteps around her, other girls, each no older than thirteen, a dozen of them coming from the shadows, all gasping, all reaching out, each contorted by torture before their eventual suffocation.

Sarah knew they were tortured, for as the children walked towards her, the memories of each one of them was slowly downloading. Each a prize, held for weeks until their bodies grew too feeble to accommodate his desires. He had taken them all, from schools, playgroups, whilst their parents' backs were turned. Each of them was the spitting image of his sister, Lucy.

They used to play, laugh, while the days away. But a cloud grew over those saccharine-sweet memories. Their uncle, his name long erased. A burly man, gut hanging heavy, wobbling with every thundering step. He



would take Lucy by the hand, her tiny fingers wrapped around his massive fat digit, and walk the little girl upstairs, with a barked instruction at Liam to sit still, shut up, until they returned. Every time Lucy came back downstairs, she would be different.

Over the weeks, she would become her normal self again, but the next time their uncle babysat, the cycle would repeat. Sarah remembered the night Lucy just wouldn't stop crying. The two of them laying in their beds in the small terraced house in Bromley. Sodden, peeling wallpaper in the corner hanging like a new page waiting to be turned, the window letting in a trickle of water when it rained too hard, and those cries digging into his skull. He begged her to stop, begged her to shut up so he could get to sleep, but she couldn't. He slapped her, the cries ceased only momentarily from shock. They started up again and he hit her over and over, but the droning noise wouldn't stop. He put a pillow over her head and tried to drown out the tears, find some peace. Eventually there was peace.

These girls, these replacement Lucys, they weren't even close to the real thing. Sarah could feel his emotions, if you could call them that. Adoration and disdain all at once. He made them cry just like Lucy, and tried to calm them down, thinking maybe this time it wouldn't end the same. But each time it did. Each time he found himself wanting to hurt them more, see their expressions as they gasped for air. She now knew him as well as he knew himself. Or at least knew who he was before the trial. His trial, NLI-08 had given him the tools to control his 'quirks', as Whark called them. Put the cycle on pause whilst he did her bidding. He liked Whark, she reminded him of his mother. His mother also had a foul mouth and was strict with him, locking him in the dark, leaving him with nothing but a typewriter to play with. Whark had become his new mother, a better mother. And every so often, she would let him out to play, let him find a new Lucy.

*'Do you like my little sisters?'* Liam asked, voice echoing from beyond the shadows.

*'It's fucking perverse.'* she said. *'You're sick.'*

*'Darling, we're all sick, this is a place for sick people. All of us are fucked up in the head and need a little fixing!'*

*'You're done here. The rest of the group knows you're a fraud.'*

*'I doubt that will do them much good. Not with you trapped in here...'*

Sarah's face was contorted into a grimace, and the group were worried about how long she had spent inside Liam's head.

*'We should we go in after her.'* said Alex.

*'Give her another minute... she might be getting information.'* said Micah.

*'We don't know that.'* said Pete. *'We can't even network with her! For all we know, he's turning her into a vegetable!'*

*'They're so worried about you, isn't that sweet!'* said Liam, emerging from the shadows, a wide jack-o'-lantern grin carved on his face.

*'You can hear them?'* she asked.

*'You can't? God you're fucking slow, aren't you? Are they teaching you guys at retard speed?'*

*'They're taking their time. From what I've read, previous subjects had a habit of going completely fucking insane.'*

*'In my group, we all started insane. There wasn't much room for improvement. Although I think I've improved on it a little...'*

The girls started walking towards Sarah, clawing at her projected skin with their tiny nails, ripping meat away that felt all too real. She tried to hold in the screams, didn't want to give him the satisfaction of hurting her, but they dug deeper and deeper, overpowered her, pushed her to the floor and clawed her clothes away, scraping at every bare scrap of flesh with five razors on each tiny hand.

*'I know what you're thinking.'* he said *'He's only blocking me from my friends because I'm in his head, his projection. Do you want to test that theory?'*

The shadows consumed the girls, and withdrew. Sarah found herself lying down, a cold concrete floor beneath her, she was clothed again, under bright white florescent lights. Liam stood over her.

*'Well, this is an interesting memory, isn't it.'*

He looked over to two silver gurneys, pulling back the sheets on the bodies. Sarah knew where she was, knew this memory all too well. She rose to her feet and tried to avert her eyes from the corpses.

*'Your mother had such lovely tits.'* he said. *'Shame that crash did such horrible things to the rest of her. Then again, I guess that means there's a*

*lot more holes for me to play with now, aren't there!"*

He placed his hands on Sarah's mother, fingers tracing every laceration, probing deep into the wounds.

*'Oh, this is going to be fun!'* he said, before a fist knocked him across the room, the sheet curling back up over Sarah's parents by itself.

*'My head, my rules.'* she said, anger coursing through her veins.

*'That's not how it works, darling.'* he said, picking himself up, with a gleeful smile. *'The tactile connection is a bond of minds, and the stronger mind is in the driving seat.'*

Sarah had her arms grabbed from either side, the naked dessicated corpses of her parents holding her back as she struggled, fought their grasp, but to no avail.

*'I was rather hoping this would be more of a challenge...'* he said, strutting over to a sideboard, casually picking up a scalpel. *'But when it comes down to it, you're just a lost little girl...'*

Sarah glared at him, continued to fight for freedom as he took slow steps towards her, blade glimmering under the strip lighting. With each step he seemed taller, larger, and Sarah realised it was *her* that was shrinking, the scant few wrinkles on her hands disappearing as she shrank, became younger, her hair growing, curling past her shoulders, turning blonde as the years withdrew.

*'Just another Lucy...'* he said, taking the scalpel to her clothes and slicing them open. *'Mummy and Daddy just letting the bad things happen. You'll cry and cry, but the bad things keep happening... until you can't cry any longer.'* He put his face close to hers, his free hand lingering at her projections' young hip, Sarah could feel cold, dry fingers scraping across her smooth skin as he moved his hand across her pelvis.

*'Do you think you're a big scary monster?'* she said, through gritted teeth, trying to hide the revulsion as his hand snaked up her belly. *'Some kind of boogeyman? Just because you kidnapped and tortured a bunch of helpless girls?'*

His eyes narrowed at her back-talk, and he raised the scalpel, in a quick movement slicing off one of her nipples. She held in the agony, tried to redirect it and shut it off, knowing it wasn't real. Her eyes welled with tears, but she wouldn't let them fall, wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

*'You know the difference between you and me?' she asked, through the pain. 'Other than you being completely insane...' she laughed, biding her time, taking deep breaths to keep the screams in. 'The difference between you and me, is that you're just one crazy fucking psychopath... but me... I've got friends!'* A smile peeled up her face as she fired off a macro.

Sarah seemed to be in pain, but even when the others tried to make a tactile connection to her, it wasn't working. The chatter flew back and forth, queries about how the connection worked, whether they could pull her away from Liam and reclaim her, or if it would hurt her in the process, maybe even kill her. They didn't have time to test the theory. Sarah's hand fired out to the left and grabbed Alex's wrist.

Alex was pulled through the firewall Liam had set up, a fence of bones and dried blood, organs wound together with hair, exploding into dust as she burst through. She turned back to look at the hole made by her entry, and watched it reform, trapping them in Liam's head. All the information Sarah had gathered since being in his mind was downloading into her own, and Alex found herself projected at her friend's side, the two women staring down the killer.

*'That's not possible!'* he grunted.

Sarah rose to her full height, her full age, her nipple regrown and clothes putting themselves back together.

*'You're not as strong as you think you are.'* Sarah said, as she and Alex walked towards him. *'Not as smart, certainly not the best. You're just a survivor.'*

She pulled up projections of his induction, his group of seven, his trials, as each of the other six started going insane, unable to handle the drugs, the tones or false memories.

*'You're the only survivor of your group because you gamed the system, pretended you weren't insane, and agreed to have yourself locked up under their care, spying on future experiments.'*

She projected him in his room at the facility, typing in the dark at mechanical keys, superimposing it with the dark room his mother put him in with a typewriter.

*'You're barely even a monster. You're just a tragic little boy who never learnt impulse control, and likes to rape and kill... '*

*'That's not true!' he said, slicing at the women with the scalpel. 'I'll show you a fucking monster!'* He stabbed Sarah in the gut over and over.

*'You can try and kill one of us,' said Alex. 'Maybe you'll get two of us. But you won't get us all.'* She activated the macro Sarah gave her in the download, which she had been tinkering with whilst Sarah acted as a diversion.

Pete and Farah were pulled in to Liam's head, endowed with the data packet as they breached the firewall of corpses. The hole they made was slower to rebuild, and Micah traversed the network connection after them. All five stood over Liam, Sarah's projected wounds healing.

*'What's happening?'* he said, dropping the scalpel, falling to his knees, holding his projected head in agony. Thirteen little blonde girls appeared around him, twelve with bags over their heads, the one at the front, the original Lucy, taking his head in her hands.

*'You've been strutting and stabbing and showing off your shit.'* said Sarah

*'And this whole time...'* said Farah *'We've been digging around in your subconscious, taking the intel we need, setting up automations to delete everything.'*

*'I **am** the experiment!'* he screamed at her. *'I'm the best there is!'*

*'Of your trial, maybe.'* said Pete. *'But we're two generations on, two generations better, and not **completely** fucking insane, so that makes you kinda obsolete.'*

*'You can't stop me. I'm a fucking machine! I control everything!'* he spat back at them.

*'Can you pull up your mental or biological functions?'* Alex asked, smiling as he found he was denied access to his own controls.

*'Superuser trumps asshole.'* said Micah, breaking down the remains of the grisly firewall constructed around Liam's mind. One by one, their projected bodies dissipated, leaving Sarah alone, standing behind the girls surrounding Liam.

*'Memory by memory, bodily function by bodily function, we're shutting this experiment down. Shutting **you** down. Say goodbye to Lucy... '*

He looked at the tiny blonde standing in front of him, her bloodshot eyes showing nothing but revulsion.

*'I love you Lucy...'* he said, his hand touching her face, then slowly making its way down her body.

Sarah didn't want to see where his hand was going, and wouldn't let that be the last thought he had before he was turned into a vegetable. She had Lucy push her brother away. He looked at her, dejected, and then puzzled, as a smile crawled across her thin, grey lips. One of the little blonde girls came from behind, pulling a polythene bag over his head whilst the others held him down. He struggled for breath, blood vessels popping in his eyes. Lucy stared at him as he gasped. He knew that expression. She wanted to see his life leave his body.

Sarah rejoined the others back in the living quarters, relinquishing her hand from Liam's skin, the connection severed, his brain and bodily functions shutting down one by one.

*'Do we have all we need?'* asked Farah.

*'We don't have much choice...'* said Sarah, projecting one of the last memories she stole from Liam.

He had observed a group of NLI-09 subjects who attempted escape. The facility filled with gas, and soon after they were shot by twenty highly trained guards storming their exit point.

*'If APEX has its way, we're either leaving here in body bags, or like him...'* she said, pointing to Liam.

*'I think he's shitting himself...'* said Pete. *'I vote we don't end up like him.'*

*'So let's get Rob, get proof of the experiment, and get the fuck out.'* said Alex.

*'Easier said than done...'* said Micah, sharing live feeds from the NeuralNet. There were four guards posted outside the re-education room. Two were at the entrance to the testing area, another two positioned outside the living quarters, and pairs patrolling every hallway. Outside, a bus of additional guards had pulled up, and the men were being deployed around the base.

*'They want a fight?'* said Sarah, with a smile. *'Let's give them a fucking fight.'*

Whark knew something was wrong. In ten years of tests, she had seen the warning signs in varying degrees. With this trial as her final chance to prove the project, she thought it better to err on the side of caution. Using the ruse of a newly devised live fire test to get approval for the extra guards, and had ordered them to incapacitate any subjects seen walking around unaccompanied. She stuck a wad of angrily-chewed nicotine gum over the webcam and reconnected her terminal, linking with the A-Eyes in the living quarters, observing her playthings. They were all asleep. She eyed the feed suspiciously, and reached for her phone, going through the numbers until she found the one she didn't usually like to call, marked 'Butcher'. She only called him when things were truly fucked, and a reluctant part of her worried that the trial might be headed that way.

“Whark.” the voice said, a dry rasp that sounded pleased to receive her call. Her communications with him had the tendency to result in a slaughter, and he loved a good cull.

“I need you in the system.” she said.

“Is that all?” he said, sounding disappointed.

“For now.” she said, pausing as she realised he might need an incentive. “But there is the possibility of shechita down the line.” she used his term, the Hebrew for ritualised animal slaughter, knowing he'd appreciate it.

“Very well.” he said. She could almost hear the smile on his lips, before a soft gasp as he connected to the NeuralNet. The images on her screen flickered, the A-Eye feeds displaying what was actually happening in the room in place of Micah's loop. The five subjects were standing by the door in silence, whilst her infiltrator lay unconscious in his bunk.

“Thank you.” she said. “I’ll be in touch if we require your... more specialised services.”

She hung up and tapped her watch, opening a comm channel to the guards.

“All units, converge on the living quarters.”

She would have the shit beaten out of the subjects, relish watching every impact and wound, then have them completely wiped and fully re-educated. There was no time for baby steps, not now they seemed intent on revolt.

The group stood at the door, Micah's hand to the lock, sharing the camera feeds with the others. Pete tracked the troop movements on the map, whilst Alex, Sarah and Farah switched over to hypersight, pumped adrenaline, took their fear and anxiety offline, oxygenated their blood and redirected strength in preparation for the fight.

'They're coming.' said Pete. 'Ten seconds.'

A silent countdown was shared across the group's interfaces, and Micah unlocked the door.

'Three, two, one.'

The women launched themselves at the guards, hypersight in full effect, seeing every movement around them in slow motion, but able to react in real-time. Sarah dodged the first guard's nightstick, reaching a hand into the gap between the body armour and his helmet, her fingers coming in contact with his neck, sending the order to sleep. She kicked him into the next guard, dodged another's blow and ripped his helmet off, throwing it at a further guard whilst knocking out the now-unprotected guard. Alex grabbed a nightstick coming for Sarah's head, kicked the guard back into a wall and pulled his glove off, tactile connection made, he was out cold. Her targeting system fired up and she threw the nightstick at a guard storming towards her, cracking his helmet, following it with a roundhouse to the side of his head that knocked him into another two guards.

Farah didn't like violence, and chose to duck and weave between the guards, surreptitiously sending the sleep command whenever she saw an opportunity to touch scant bare flesh that came within reach. Micah watched from the door, keeping the connection with the NeuralNet, giving them a live camera feed of the guard's placement around them to see what hypersight couldn't. Pete took a run up and joined the fray, grabbing a guard's arm and swiftly being cracked in the side of the head with the



nightstick from another he hadn't seen. He shook it off, took his pain receptors offline, and remembered he hadn't turned hypersight on. Wrenching the baton from the guard who struck him, he turned it on him, then another, pummelling them alternately in the helmeted faces before redirecting strength to punch through the plastic, sending the sleep command to their bodies through knuckle-to-face contact. Within two minutes, the fight was over. Guards incapacitated, Pete pulled shards of plastic from the helmet's screen out of his fist.

*'That's gonna hurt in the morning...'* he said.

*'Everyone know where they're going?'* Sarah asked.

They did. The group waited for the greenlight as Micah sent a series of diversions through the A-Eye system, then scattered through the hallways.

Whark watched the group destroy her reinforcements with mixed feelings. They were working as a team, completely in sync, better than any selection of subjects in previous trials. Yet, they were using the skills she had imbued to revolt, just as past groups had attempted. But none had ever got this far. She considered activating sonics through the building, but decided it was a waste of time. The rebels would likely deactivate their hearing before the effects could take hold. Instead, she called the orderlies, ordering them to “Get the fuck to the re-education room” and implored them do whatever it took to put a stop to the escape attempt. She knew it wouldn't do much good, but would take a small semblance of pleasure in the two giant idiots having the shit kicked out of them, as she had wanted to do for so very long. Whark stood from her desk, taking her coat from the rack, and began packing what few personal possessions she had into a bag. She knew this would only end one way, and wasn't going to let them have a chance to take all her secrets.

Alex and Micah arrived at the re-education room, taking out the guards with ease. Micah had the NeuralNet unlock the door, and deactivated the tones before they entered, finding Rob unconscious on the gurney.

*'Rob?'* said Alex. *'Can you hear me?'* There was no response, no connection, just her own thoughts bouncing back.

“Rob!” she said, out loud, slapping him across the face. Still no reaction.

*'Get in there.'* said Micah. *'Wake him up from the inside.'*

Alex took Rob's hand in hers, and activated the tactile connection.

Rob's mind was silent. Dark. No dreams, no thoughts, just emptiness. Alex looked around, tried to pull up his user interface to get systems back online, but she couldn't find it.

*'I'm in... but it's like he's an empty shell.'* she told the others.

*'They wiped his mind.'* said Micah, going through the re-education room logs. *'Wiped everything.'*

*'So we leave him? If he's not himself anymore, then what can we do?'* asked Farah.

*'We're **not** going to leave him.'* said Sarah, defiantly. *'We're going to give him everything he's given us. Every conversation, every shared memory, everything we know about him. They took him from us, so let's put him back together.'*

From their positions across the facility, the group shared their memories of Rob. Every laugh, every tear. Their first thoughts of him, the first conversation they heard him have with Leah, the feelings they could all tell were blossoming between the two. Using Alex as a conduit, they fed the experiences back, where Micah's very basic understanding of the programming process and Farah's medical knowledge tried to allocate the information to the correct sector of the brain.

*'If we give the brain enough information, it should be able to sort it out and put it in the right place.'* she said, not entirely convinced, but hiding her uncertainty from the group.

It had to work. They weren't willing to lose another one of their number to the experiment.

Micah started the download of the operating system and user interface, taking his time rather than dumping it all in one go. He knew he had to be cautious, and wasn't going to risk destroying Rob's fragile neural pathways in the process.

Pete and Farah found their way above ground, sneaking from building to building, and commandeered the bus from three unwitting guards. Neither of them had driven before, but Micah shared his driving experience with the others, and Pete fired the engine up, careening through the base, hitting anyone that tried to come at them.

They were to do three more passes of the base, make sure every potential threat was taken out, and arrive at the entrance to the facility just in time for the others' exit.

Sarah had made it through the hallways with little interference, and unlocked the door that the A-Eyes had marked as 'records room'. The camera feed had shown wall-to-wall filing cabinets that she knew must be a treasure trove of proof that would implicate APEX in no uncertain terms. She entered and went through their labels, from 'NLI-07' back through to 'NLI-00', three cabinets for each, five drawers tall. She knew she should look at the most recent trials, but found herself going to the farthest one on automatic pilot. If each experiment was a year's worth of research, then NLI-00 would have been the experiment her parents were a part of. With an unsure hand, she pulled the top drawer open. It fought her tug with a rusty squeak. She redirected all her strength in to the arm and tried pulling it again, flinging the drawer across the room. It was empty, rusted shut from lack of use.

She pulled the next one open, it was also empty. Sarah tried drawers of the cabinets marked NLI-01, but it was the same, as were 02 and 03. She pulled drawer after drawer, flinging them across the room with increasing rage as each of them was bare. They hadn't used paper backups for years. This was either a decoy, or they just destroyed the paper records and didn't bother removing the cabinets. She went to the door, feeling defeated and touched the lock to exit, but found herself being pulled into the NeuralNet.

Her subconscious was leading her somewhere, traipsing through camera feeds, trying to find something, but her conscious mind didn't know what. She let her mind surf the digital stream of its own accord until it found what it was looking for.

Whark was leaving her office, bag in hand, she was getting out before it all came crashing down on her head. Sarah wasn't going to let that happen.

Disconnecting from the NeuralNet, Sarah stormed out the door, pinpointing Whark's location on the map, running down the hallway in pursuit.

Alex and Micah were still deep in Rob's mind. He was mostly through unpacking the OS, and laying out the UI, whilst Alex was using Farah's knowledge to place the memories in as correct an area of his brain as possible.

*'Two more minutes.'* said Micah *'Then I think we can boot him up.'* He pulled out of Rob's head as he saw the orderlies on the camera feeds, stomping down the corridor towards their location.

Letting go of the door lock, he shook his hands out, cracked his knuckles, and pulled up the sleep command. As the sound of clomping boots drew near, Micah hid behind the door and waited to pounce. The sounds ceased outside the room. They watched Alex from the hallway, observing the shadows in the room. After a moment, the first of them entered. Micah lunged out, hand reaching for the first orderly's wrist, which pulled away, his fist pummelling into Micah's gut, winding him. He redirected oxygen flow and turned the pain off, returning to his feet. The orderly smiled grotesquely, as if he had been waiting to put a fist through the patients' faces all this time. He threw a punch at Micah, which was dodged with the help of hypersight, but the second orderly was on him from behind, grabbing his arms, allowing the first to throw fist after fist into Micah's face and gut, taking great pleasure with each connection of his knuckles. The second orderly let go of Micah, allowing him to drop to the ground, and the first picked him up for the second to get his punches in. Another punch to the gut had him buckling over, the first orderly wrenching him back up for another round.

When Micah raised his head, there was a smile curling up his lips. The second orderly pulled his arm back and fired it at the smile. As the fist connected with Micah's face, he sent a packet of data through to the orderly's brain. The next fist flying missed Micah completely, every ounce of the giant's strength crunching the bones in the face of his cohort, then another and another. The first orderly tried to fight back, but his auto-piloting colleague wasn't going to back down, and couldn't feel the blows. The second orderly stood over the first, who was now a bloody mess. He looked at his hands, the programming coming to an end, and realised what he had done

“Hey, asshole.” said Alex, getting his attention.

Alex, Micah and Rob put their hands on his face and together, wiped his mind clean. The gargantuan beast fell to the floor, and the three of them left for the rendezvous.

Sarah was only a few corners behind Whark. She touched a door lock briefly as she ran to be certain her quarry hadn't changed paths, speeding up her pursuit. Whark turned as Sarah came round the corner behind her, and smiled.

“My, what a fantastic fucking crusader you are... A fucking revolutionary. Just like your worm-food parents.”

“You don't know shit about my parents.” said Sarah, walking confidently towards Whark.

“I know them better than *you*, you fucking burnout. This is their experiment. I was with them every step or the way whilst they created the NLI programme. Did you know that? Did you know they spent their lives trying to programme people? Tortured fuck-knows how many in the process of reaching their dream?”

“It wasn't their dream. It was their job.”

“It was never just a job to them. They were pioneers, leading the fucking way in NeuroLoader technology, no matter the cost in human lives. It was only when that little cunt, a little girl just like you exposed some tiny little *'conspiracy'* that they started getting all emotional, *'What if that was my little girl'* they said...”

“You were spying on them?” said Sarah, within a few footsteps of reaching distance of Whark.

“We're spying on everyone, idiot. And your parents knew it. They knew what was going to happen if they tried to whistleblow...”

“It was you.” Sarah said, realising Whark's place in her parent's death. “You had them killed.”

“Of course I fucking did. They had to die because having you made them think twice about doing their fucking job, and now you have to die, because I'm completest like that...”

“Good luck trying to kill me when you're a fucking vegetable.” Sarah said, planting a hand on Whark's neck. She initiated the tactile connection. Nothing happened.

“Well that was disappointing...” said Whark, with a laugh.

“What the fuck?” said Sarah, planting another hand on her, the tactile connection still refusing to work.

“Until your mummy and daddy did something very dumb, they were very fucking smart.” she pulled her collar, revealing a scar at the back of her neck, a paper-thin circuit board visible just beneath the skin. “Neural Firewall.” she explained. “There's no getting into my head, sweetness.” She threw a punch at Sarah's face, which was dodged with ease.

“Neural firewall... pretty smart” said Sarah. “Not so smart for being the big bad Bond villain and showing me...”

In a swift movement, Sarah was behind Whark, her nails slicing through the scar and ripping out the chip from its connection with her spinal cord. She planted a hand on Whark's forehead, and activated the tactile connection.

Whark's memories flooded through Sarah's mind, dispersed through the network to the others. She went through every memory of every experiment. Every meeting and report. Gathered and distributed all the intel amongst the group and pulled out, disabling the spinal column controls as she left the connection. Whark fell to the floor, her legs refusing to hold her weight, and Sarah strutted down the hallway triumphantly to join the others at the entrance.

Whark reached to her bag with an arm that barely responded to her commands, knocking the contents on to the floor and shouting at her phone, commanding it to call head office.

“The experiment had fucking failed.” she said. “The idiot guards couldn't contain a simple fucking rebellion. I want the Butcher dispatched after these fucks to clean up the mess...”

“Miss Whark.” said the voice on the other end, a young male speaker that she didn't recognise.

“Who the fuck is this?” she said.

“Nathaniel Myra. I'm the new head of Network Operations.”

“New head?” Whark spat, venomously. “I'm the fucking head of Network Operations!”

“Not any more, Miss Whark, I'm afraid this little fuck up of yours was somewhat expected... You're being reassigned to a project with a more... observational role.”

“The fuck I am!” she shrieked, flailing on the floor. Myra chuckled as he hung up, leaving the woman abandoned in the hallway with only the red lights of the prying A-Eyes for company.

The bus pulled up as Sarah ran along the corridor, joining Alex, Rob and Micah as they made their way out of the facility and climbed on board. It took off at speed down the dirt road towards the gate, smashing through the aluminium mesh as if it were paper.

*'So that's it?' asked Rob. 'We're free?'*

*'Free to do what?' asked Farah 'They're going to be looking for us...'*

*'We're not done.'* said Sarah.

She pulled up the intel she took from Whark's head.

*'These fucks have governments in their pocket, politicians eating out of their hands, and there are nineteen other facilities around the world... nineteen other NLI experiments, where people just like us are being taken apart, put back together. Personalities and memories wiped, emotions turned off, turned into fucking robots, and they're not all going to be able to get out like we did...'*

*'So what do you want to do?' asked Micah.*

*'First, we're going to free our brothers and sisters,' said Sarah. 'And then... we're going to take the fight to APEX.'*

## EPILOGUE

Marx withdrew her fingers from Agent Murphy's hand, severing the tactile connection. He shook off the download that had been dumped in his memories and looked at her.

“Did that just happen?” he asked.

“About six months ago, sure.” she said.

“I meant... did you just... network with me?”

She grabbed his hand again.

*'I did.'* she said, her words a whisper through his thoughts.

She closed the connection as Agent Murphy undid her cuffs and removed them.

“That's why you're here? That's why you went after the Secretary?” he asked.

“He was in their pocket. Travel records on the NeuralNet had him visiting at least two facilities before he pushed for increased investment for NLI-enhanced troops to be instated in military units. He's just another pawn, but it's one step closer.”

“How many facilities have you freed?” he asked.

“Four.” she said. “There's twenty-eight of us now. Maybe another fourteen after we breach the two we just discovered.”

“Do you think you can really do this? Free the others? Have a revolution? Bring down the company?”

“I do.” she said, conviction on her face. “But we can't do it alone. We need people like you, good people, who want to do the right thing. I'd have approached you back in Texas, but needed the time to get to know you a little better...” She gave him a smile, knowing him better than he did himself.

“So.” she said. “Want to change the world?”

Marx knew his response before it came out of his mouth. As she walked away, one of the network nodes, Madero, routed Murphy's call over the radio for her to hear. He declared the altercation with Marx as a case of



mistaken identity. He was certain the unknown subject fleeing The Plaza never made it that far and instructed all units to begin searching in a radial pattern.

Shedding her moniker of Marx, Sarah walked to the next subway stop, feeling a little bad for rewiring Murphy's brain whilst he was distracted with the data dump. His reward and pleasure centres were set to give him a little dopamine boost every time he thought about her, thought about their revolution. It would feel natural, as if he had always had love for her, and love for the coming change. Even though she knew it was wrong, this was how they had recruited all their assets thusfar, and how they would continue to do so.

Finding real revolutionaries in a time of myriad distractions was something they all knew was unlikely. Even anti-corporation and anti-capitalist groups they had approached proved to be more about rhetoric and armchair revolutions than actually changing the world. So they were making their own. The Network watched through her eyes as she got on the train and headed back to their base in Brooklyn. The others were already hard at work placing the additional facilities on the map and coming up with plans to storm them. Each time it was getting more difficult, there was more chance of casualty or failure, but they wouldn't let that stop them. There were fifteen more facilities to take down, and at least a hundred more NLI subjects to break free.

Sarah took a seat and watched over the information being put together by the Network, each of them working in harmony, filling the skill gaps with one another's knowledge. Together, there was no stopping them. And there was no time for them to stop.

There was work to be done.

# ABOUT ABAM.INFO

ABAM, or 'A Book A Month', is a terrible experiment to see how long a former screenwriter can produce a original novella every month before he goes insane.

Alternating between dramatic and comedic prose, the books will be released on on the first Monday of every month in print, audiobook and as ebooks.

If you've enjoyed this book in any capacity, do please review it on [Amazon](#) and [Goodreads](#) – I read them all and will no doubt veer towards writing more of what you like.

Please visit the links below for more information and forthcoming releases.

<http://amazon.com/author/leeisserow>

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*Thank you kindly for being an observer to my mental deterioration.*

NEXT MONTH ON ABAM:

## **I HATE TIME TRAVELLERS**

### **SYNOPSIS**

Five years ago, everyone became a time traveller. Everyone except Luke Denton.

The entire planet has been reshaped to accommodate this gift, and very little thought has been put into Non-Travellers like Luke. They're all too busy travelling through time and space to care.

Luke tries to live a normal life in a world where practical jokes have gone up 60,000%, his roommate insists on having 12-self orgies in front of him, and every potential girlfriend he's had seems to get mad at him for stuff he hasn't done yet.

He finally thinks he's found the perfect woman when he finds himself in bed with a future version of himself, and a secret government agency is hunting him down with the intention of slicing him up for experimentation.

No wonder he hates time travellers...

# I HATE TIME TRAVELLERS

## SAMPLE CHAPTER

It was August 25th 2010, exactly five years, eight months and three days since T-Day. That's what they were calling it now, although it had been through many deviations of name and overall rebrandings in that time. At first it was referred to as 'The Happening', but that just brought back memories of the M. Night movie that bored the hell out of millions of film patrons just a few years previous. 'The Event' didn't last long either, for not dissimilar reasons. T.S. Day was the name of choice for a little while, but that too was laid to rest, as the conservative media weren't particularly comfortable with conjuring images of gender transition whenever they discussed the fundamental change in the human race that had occurred. Not that the general public seemed to notice or mind. They were all too busy travelling through time and space to care.

All of them except Luke Denton and around a thousand other souls who'd been left behind whilst the rest of the human race were evolved against their will, by a force conspiracy theorists around the world had put down to anything from governmental to extra terrestrial tinkering. Each of these non-travellers had a story, each of them as boring as the last. Luke's story was based solely on unfortunate timing. Had the boiler in his apartment not gone out, and the electricity not follow soon after, he would have never ventured down to the basement. If he had just looked out the window, rather than obsessing over the utilities failing, he would have seen the night's sky glow a violet hue, the streetlamps flicker and die as the clouds dissipated, followed by the stars blinking out of view one by one. When the planet was dark and alone in the night's sky, the purple skies faded, replaced by darkness. A silent planet in the black. Once a hub of radio activity emanating into space, now a silent void. Time passed. Nobody could say how long. Then, one by one the stars returned, winking back into existence. Normality resumed.

But everyone who was above ground while the spectacle occurred was now far from normal. In the initial panic, terrified governments threw billions at scientists, trying in vain to restrict travelling - but it was nigh on impossible. However, after the initial months of mass migration, population numbers were not actually that dissimilar to how they were before T-Day. With borders being entirely irrelevant, nation states finally put their differences aside and declared the United Nations the centralized home of world government. Oppression and persecution swiftly ended, because the oppressed and persecuted could be anywhere else at the drop of a hat - and now that transport costs were entirely negated, feeding and watering the third world was a task anyone could do. The world had become a utopia. Not that anyone would call it as such, seeing as they all still had to earn money.

So despite living in a paradise where time had little meaning any longer, the denizens of the planet still grumbled. Although few grumbled as much as Luke. He had, in the last half-decade, trawled the internet and watched maybe hundreds of videos of the event, witnessing vicariously what he missed through handi-cam eyes. The others all seemed entirely disinterested in re-watching the marvel – mostly because of the constant back-and-forthing through their recent chronology. At one point, desperate to be like the rest of the human race, he begged his roommate Kyle to take him back to T-Day, or at the very least travel back to and stop him from heading down to the basement (it's not like he managed to work out how to fix the electricity or boiler anyway). But to no avail. He had heard rumours and they turned out to be true; travellers could not go back to before they gained their ability, and even if it were possible, there were tangential factors at work that as a non-traveller he could only begin to try to wrap his head around.

But that was years ago, when he still cared. Luke had long since given up the dream of being like everyone else, and resigned to the fact that he would never know what it was like to travel through time, other than in the normal (and distinctly boring) linear fashion. At the present moment, unable to relocate in the blink of an eye as he deeply wished he could, he was sitting on the couch in his apartment while Kyle was standing with his hands at his zipper, offering to urinate on him.

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***I Hate Time Travellers** will be available from  
**ABAM.Info** and **Amazon**  
from 4<sup>th</sup> April 2016*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lee Isserow is an award-winning screenwriter and filmmaker, with over fifteen years spent trawling the back streets and dark alleys of the 'entertainment' industry.

He's pretty sure he has some traits of autism, because he's been constantly working and obscenely prolific for the entire duration, writing over a hundred screenplays, many of which he's adapting into forthcoming ABAMs, because very few people are willing to turn them into movies. For now.

He lives in Liverpool, England because he accidentally bought a house there. He's not quite sure how that happened – but assumes part of that is because he used to drink a lot.

If you'd like to watch the pretty things he makes, you may find them at [LeeIsserow.com](http://LeeIsserow.com).

You may also interact, call him names, and read his awful jokes and observations on Twitter; [@Lee\\_Isserow](https://twitter.com/Lee_Isserow).

## OTHER BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR





At 21, Cassie's life sucks. So on a whim, she starts farming her decisions out to Twitter. Before she knows it, the lives of her family and friends hang in the balance, and she's racing against the clock to discover who's pulling her strings.

### **Dead City**

Jon Gilligan is the only living man in a city of the undead.

He narrates his daily routine in the style of a noir detective, casting himself as a hero to all those around him.

When he stumbles on to a conspiracy, it's time for him to be a hero for real, break out of the city and his noir fantasy to save London's Dead City from itself.